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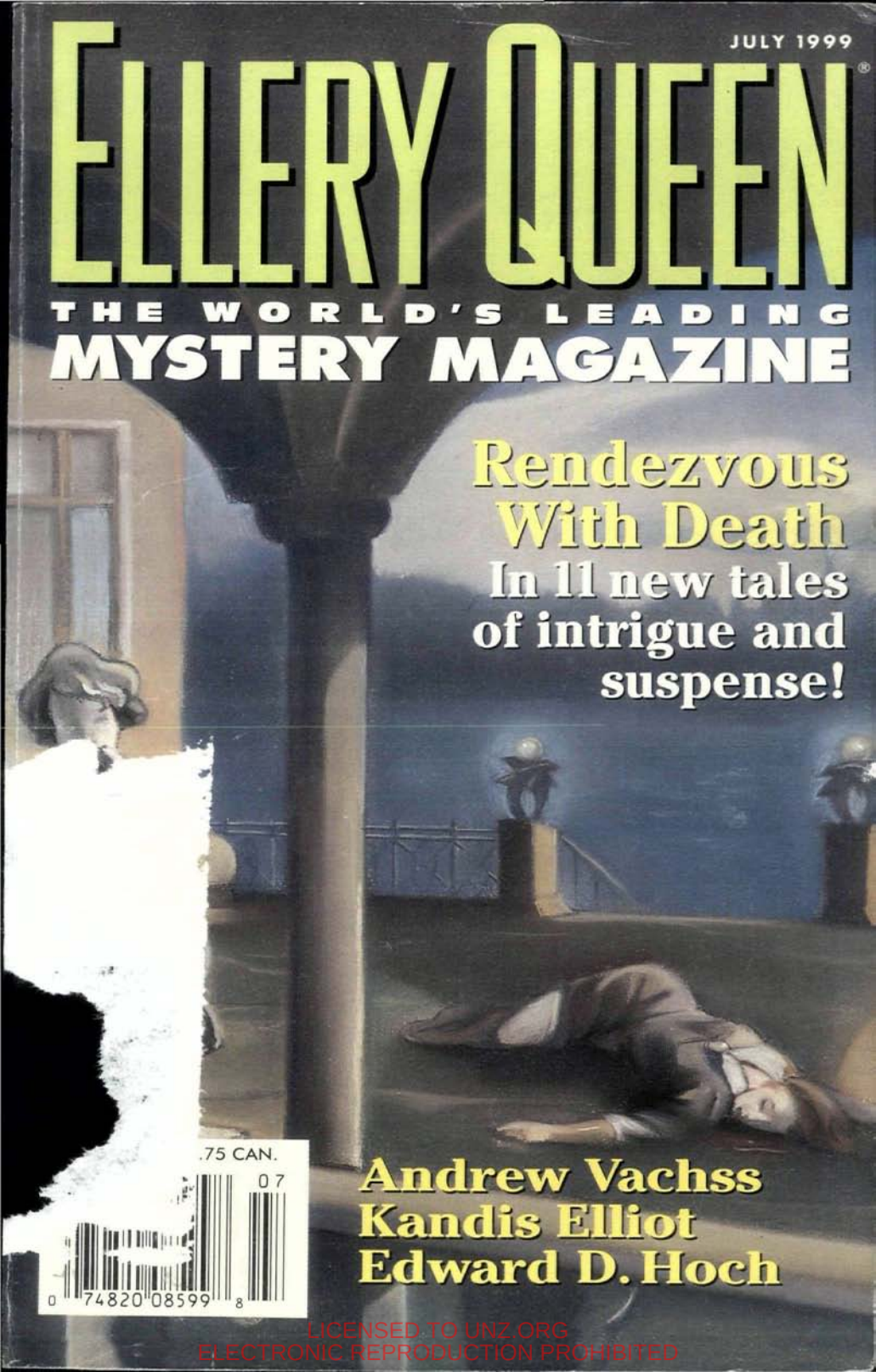

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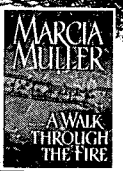

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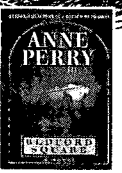

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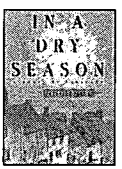

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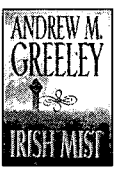

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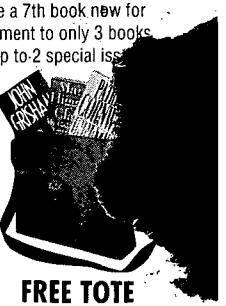

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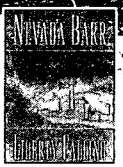

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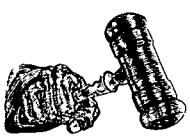

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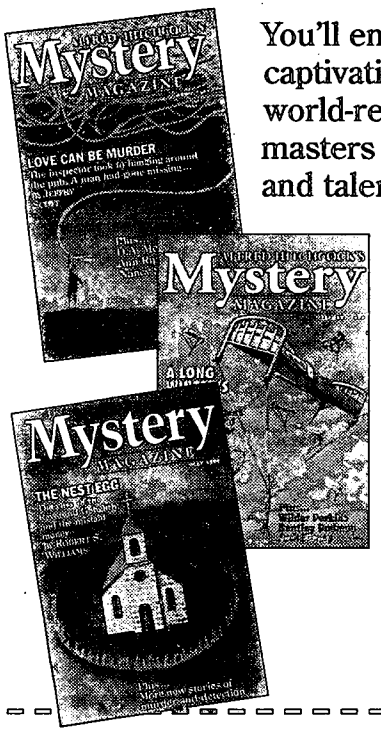

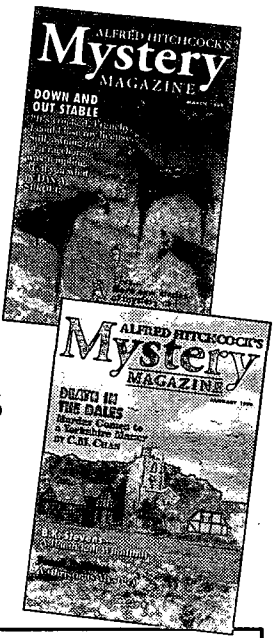

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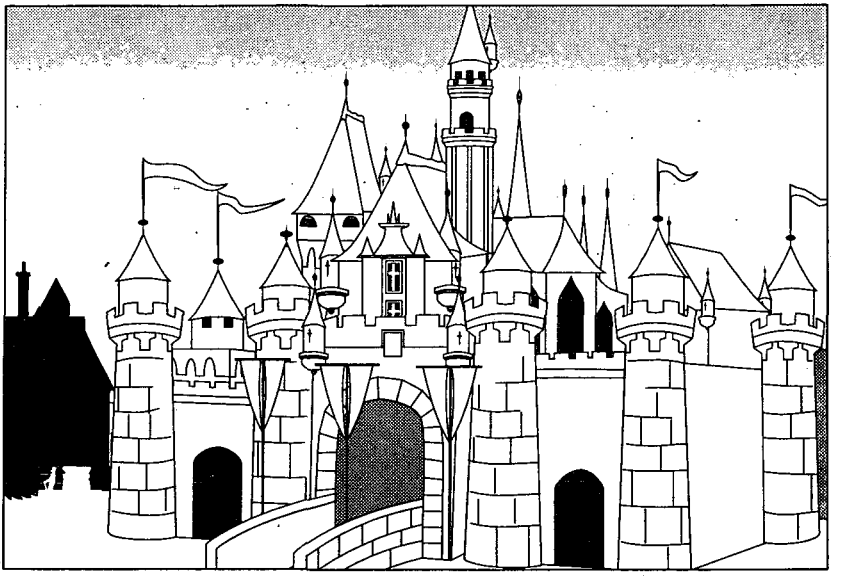

JOYCE'S CHILDREN

by Stuart M. Kaminsky

I don't like theme parks, any of them—long lines, short rides, teens dressed like Mickey and Goofy or Bugs, in hot suits, trying to make the best of a minimum-wage job they thought was going to be fun and easy. And I don't like the high prices and robots that we're supposed to think look like Thomas Jefferson or Mighty Joe Young or Mighty Mouse.

"You're not a kid," said Dave when I gave him my opinion, which he had listened to with nodding attention.

Dave owns the Dairy Queen across the parking lot from where I live and work in a crumbling walk-up office building that had begun life as a 1950's motel and had gradually gone downhill till it was ready for me. I'm not supposed to live in the back room of my office, but the landlord doesn't care as long as I pay my rent on time and don't complain about the ancient air conditioner.

Dave looks like a dark, deeply weathered mariner, which he is when he's not handing out Dilly Bars. He owns a boat and is out in Sarasota Bay and the Gulf of Mexico whenever possible. The sun has leathered him. The boat has given him muscles and kept him trim.

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Dave is about my age, early forties. I like to think that with his face and bleached-out hair he looks older than I do, but I'm dark, with a rapidly receding hairline that makes me look every minute of my age.

My name is Lew Fonesca. I live in Sarasota, Florida, where I drove a little over two years ago when I couldn't stand my job in the state attorney's office in Chicago and I wanted to get away from my ex-wife, who had drained me dry. My car had given out in Sarasota. I sold it for twenty-five dollars and made the first month's rent on the office overlooking the DQ and heavily traveled Route 301, which was named Washington Street. The office was the first place I had been shown.

Although Stuart Kaminsky has a reputation as one of the mystery field's finest humorists (he is the creator of both 1940s P.I. Toby Peters and Moscow cop Porfiry Rostnikov), his upcoming novel for Forge Books introduces, in book form, unlicensed P.I. Lew Fonesca, who takes on some darkly serious cases. Readers can get a sense here of the character the novel *Vengeance to the Bone* (9/99) will reveal in more detail.

Now I sat with Dave talking about theme parks at the white, chipped-enamel table with the umbrella. Dave was drinking water. I was working on a cheeseburger and a chocolate-cherry Blizzard.

I sat quietly digesting my burger and Dave's observation.

"I didn't like it when I was a kid," I said.

Dave shrugged, drank his water, and accidentally spilled a few drops on his white apron.

"When I get my kids for a few weeks in the summer," he said, "I have to take them to a theme park: Busch, Universal, Disney. I hate it. They love it. I agree with you. Most of all I hate the rides."

"Soul mates," I said, finishing the burger and giving my full attention to the Blizzard.

"Dus es shicksall giveren," he said. "It's fate."

Dave spoke five languages, all picked up when he'd traveled in Europe for two years when he got out of high school, over twenty years earlier. Dave was a quick study with not much ambition.

"Well," I said, finishing my drink with an unbecoming final slurp and getting up, "I'm on my way to Orlando."

"Wear a hat," he said as I headed for the rented car my client was paying for.

I had already packed my blue carry-on for a couple of nights and had my Cubs cap in the front seat of the Geo Prizm. I look like a big-eared dolt in the cap, but it protects my ever-growing forehead from burning under the Florida sun.

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I headed down 301, turned at Fruitville, and drove to I-75, where I headed north.

Traffic wasn't bad for two reasons: It was summer, and the snowbirds had left, reducing the population of Sarasota and the entire state of Florida significantly. It was late on a Tuesday morning, when people who worked were at work and people who didn't were in their air-conditioned homes or at Siesta Key beach on the cool white sand, ignoring the ultraviolet index.

My business had picked up considerably. Most of my clients are lawyers or are referred by lawyers for whom I serve summonses or do legwork, including tracking down dads who haven't paid their child support and runaway teens, most of whom never ran very far. I'm not a private detective. I'm a man in a Cubs cap who asks questions.

This promised to be an easy job. Jason McConeky, one of the lawyers I work for, had sent me a client. The client and I had met at Raoul's, a bar and eatery just north of downtown. If there had been a Raoul, he was long forgotten. What he had left to several owners was a place with atmosphere, the look of an old Western saloon: grizzled old men and construction crews wearing yellow hard hats, drinking beer and eating burgers or chili at the round wooden tables.

His name was Kent Sizemore. He was a very burly two hundred and fifty pounds, with a pink, round face. He was in his late thirties and knew how to dress. When we met at Raoul's, he was in a neatly pressed lightweight tan suit, complete with a bold red designer tie. He was out of place in Raoul's, but he didn't seem to notice.

"She took the kids," he said to me to open the conversation. "Jason must have told you."

"Nice to meet you," I answered. "Mr. McConeky gave me a little information."

"She had no right," Sizemore said, leaning toward me and staring into my eyes without a blink.

I don't play "who blinks first." I'm an adult. Dave at DQ was always there to remind me of that fact. I sat back and placed my order: the chili, mild.

"The same," said Sizemore. "Hot, double order."

The waiter had nodded, brought us two beers, and disappeared.

"How old are the kids? Do you have recent pictures of them and your wife?"

"Yes," he said, reaching into his inside jacket pocket. "Jason said I should bring them."

He handed me a brown envelope with a clasp. I opened it and looked at the three pictures. There were individual color photos of a boy and a girl. The boy looked as if he was about eight. The girl

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was five at the most. Both were smiling. Neither looked at all like their father. The third photograph told me who they looked like. The kids stood on each side of their mother, who wore jeans and a white shirt tied about her belly to reveal a very nice navel. Her hair was blond, just like both kids', and all three had the same smile.

"My daughter's name is Sydney, after my father. My son is Kent, Jr."

"Nice family," I said, returning the photographs to the envelope and placing it next to the chili which had just been brought to our table.

"Used to be," he said, looking down at the huge bowl in front of him. "Then. . . . Wherever Joyce has the kids, Bill Stark is probably with them."

"Friend of your wife?" I asked.

"More than a friend," Sizemore said, digging into the chili. He didn't turn red and his eyes didn't water. This was a man to be reckoned with.

"I see," I said.

"Stark worked for me," he said. "I have a real-estate agency on Siesta Key. Upscale property and boats."

"I know," I said, slowly working on my chili.

"I caught them on the phone," he said. "Joyce didn't deny it. Says it's my fault, that I've changed, that she needed attention not grunts."

"Have you?"

"What?"

"Changed," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "We've been married eleven years. I gained about ten pounds a year. It's in my genes. So Bill Stark is in my wife's jeans."

"What do you want?"

"My kids," he said. "I'd even take Joyce back if she'd come. But she had no right to run away with Stark and the kids."

"I can find them, maybe," I said. "It's hard to hide in the age of computers. But I can't force her to come back. I can tell the police."

"No," he said emphatically. "No police. Jason said they probably wouldn't do much even if I did involve them. I want this quiet."

"I can tell you where they are," I said. "And you can get a restraining order from a judge. McConeky can do that. And if she's in a hotel room with Stark and the kids, I can testify or tell a judge."

"I want my kids," he insisted.

"I told you what I can do," I said.

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He thought about that for about a minute while he continued to eat. For a big man, he was a slow, dainty eater.

"Okay," he said.

We worked out the payment, and he gave me a cash advance. I told him I'd check in with him every day, and if it started to take a lot of time he could reassess the situation, especially if I had to go out of town or out of the state. He agreed.

"Find them," he said, and dropped a ten-dollar bill on the table along with a business card. He left. His bowl was clean. His office number was on the front of the card along with his home number. I pocketed the card.

My regular computer hacker, who worked for one of my lawyer clients, was out of town. I went to my backup, Dixie Cruise, no relation to the actor.

Dixie was slim, trim, with very black hair in a short style. She was no more than twenty-five, pretty face and big round glasses. Dixie worked behind the counter at a coffee bar on Main Street. About six months back, I had sought her out to ask some questions about a straying husband and found that Dixie, who had as down-home an accent as any Billy Bob, was a computer whiz.

I called her at the coffee bar, had dinner with her at a new French restaurant, and went to her apartment in a slightly run-down twelve-flat apartment building. She had a two-room place. One room was devoted to her two computers and all kinds of grey metal pieces with lights.

It took Dixie ten minutes and cost me fifty bucks, which I would bill to Kent Sizemore. Stark belonged to AAA. Three days earlier he had purchased two adult and two children's tickets to Disney World, Sea World, and the Universal theme park. Dixie got a list of hotels in Orlando. It was a long list. She hacked into their computers and did a search for "Stark" and another one for "Sizemore."

"Embassy Suites on International Drive," Dixie said, pointing at the screen as if her right hand were a handgun. "Check out in three days."

In the old days, I would have gone to AAA, told a sad story, and hoped for the best. Then I would have tried airlines, travel agencies, and friends of Joyce and Bill Stark. Sarasota isn't huge, but it might have taken me days, which means that without Dixie they would have checked out before I found them.

That was why I was on my way to Orlando armed with three photographs and wearing a Cubs cap. There was construction on I-4 from the Tampa interchange to Orlando. I-4 is only two lanes in both directions, and it seems there are as many trucks as cars. Still, it only took me a couple of hours to get to International Drive, a street of glitz, restaurants, hotels, a water slide, plenty of

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places that sell T-shirts and souvenirs, and a Ripley's-Believe-It-or-Not house built at an odd angle as if it had just been dropped from outer space.

The hotel wasn't full, but all they had for me was a suite at almost two hundred a night. I took it, and the young man behind the desk did a great job of ignoring the fact that my luggage was a single blue carry-on.

When I got to my room, I threw my cap on the table, took the novel I was reading out of the carry-on, and went down to the atrium lobby. There were plenty of wrought-iron seats at tables and tastefully upholstered chairs scattered around the sun-filled area. I found a chair facing the front door and began reading *The Headsman* by James Harvey. I figured they were out at one of the amusement parks. I might have to wait a long time, but I was getting paid well and I had found them quickly.

Little kids ran screaming in their swimsuits, heading for the pool. Families went by speaking German, French, and something I couldn't place. I read, paused at seven to get a quick carry-out sandwich at the snack bar, and went back to my chair fairly certain that they hadn't come in during the minute or two I had been away. To be sure, I took my sandwich to the house phone and asked for their room. No answer. The machine asked if I wanted to leave a message. I hung up and went back to my chair with my tuna on white and a Diet Pepsi.

They came in a little after nine. Stark was carrying the little girl, Sydney, who was sleeping. Kent, Jr. was walking slowly, with a less than happy look on his face. His mother was definitely a beauty, but there was something less than ecstasy in her face. She was carrying a colorful shopping bag with a picture of the Lion King on the side.

There wasn't too much I could do to be inconspicuous. I don't have the kind of face people remember in any case. It is a blessing in my work and a minimal curse in my private life.

I managed to get on the elevator with the four of them, smiled, and pressed 8.

"Floor?" I asked pleasantly.

"Seven," Joyce Sizemore said, closing her eyes.

When we hit 3, she opened her eyes and looked at me.

"I know you," she said.

Stark turned to face me.

"I don't . . ." I began.

"Sarasota Y.M.C.A.," she said. "You workout there."

So much for my keenly developed internal storehouse of names and faces. How could I not remember someone who looked like Joyce Sizemore? How could she remember me?

"I do," I said with a grin. "Every morning before I go to work.

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I'm the menswear department manager at Burdine's in Southgate. Brought my wife and kids here for our annual week of torture."

"I know what you mean," she said.

The elevator stopped at 7, and they shuffled wearily out. When I reached the eighth floor, I got out quickly and headed for a spot where I could see them moving toward their room across the atrium.

After they went in, I waited for another hour, pretending my novel was a sketch book when anyone went by. I even drew a crude stick figure and a tree at one point. My watch hit ten, and I went to my room and set the alarm clock for five in the morning. I shaved, showered, shampooed, brushed my teeth, and slept. Everything was going just fine.

I had eaten the free Continental buffet breakfast and was at a two-person table slowly drinking cup after cup of coffee with *U.S.A. Today* in front of me. A little before nine, Bill Stark, Joyce Sizemore, and the kids came down. The kids were bouncing and arguing. The adults were just arguing. I couldn't hear them, but it looked as if the brief honeymoon was in trouble.

I followed them out after they breakfasted. The rest of the day was moppet heaven for the kids and nightmare alley for me. They went on and saw everything at the Disney-MGM Studios theme park while I watched from a discreet distance. I don't know what I was watching for. Possibly signs of intimacy in front of the children. A stolen passionate kiss and a little groping while the kids were in the Muppet Vision show.

We watched the Beauty and the Beast show, the Hunchback show, the Honey, I Shrunk the Kids show, the Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular, and had lunch at Disney's Toy Story Pizza Planet Arcade. By the time we hit the Voyage of the Little Mermaid, I was strongly considering calling Kent Sizemore, giving him what I had so far, and going back to Sarasota; but I wanted, I must confess, to squeeze at least another day's pay out of my client. The cable television bill was due.

They went on The Great Movie Ride and ended the day with The Making of Evita. I wished Stark would carry me or, better yet, that Joyce Sizemore would carry me.

They stopped for dinner at a seafood restaurant. I didn't eat. The chance of being spotted was too great and I didn't put much faith in, "Well, we meet again. Small world after all."

I wasn't hungry. I was tired.

When they went back to their suite, I followed and stood outside trying to listen through the window without giving the impression that I was an awkward Peeping Tom. I couldn't make out words, but the voices were hard and angry.

I went back to my room. My plan was to call Sizemore in the

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morning, give him his wife's room number, and let him do what he wished with the information.

Someone was knocking at my door. I sat up dizzy and looked at the clock with the red numbers. It was a little after three in the morning. The knock came again. I got off the bed, pulled on my pants, and went out of the bedroom to the front door.

"Yes," I said.

"Joyce Sizemore."

I opened the door. The children were both in pajamas and robes, crying. Joyce Sizemore needed a comb and a good dry cleaner. Her white robe was splotched with blood.

"Can we come in?" she asked.

I stepped back and the weeping trio came in. I closed the door and turned to watch them sit on the small sofa. Joyce Sizemore was trying to comfort them, kissing the tops of their heads, hugging her children.

"How did you know about me?" I asked.

"I called the desk after I recognized you," she said. "I said I didn't remember your name but that we knew each other from Sarasota. I described you. They found someone who remembered checking you in."

"I hope the description was kind," I said.

She didn't answer.

"Then I called some friends I can trust in Sarasota," she went on, looking at the dark television screen and hugging her sobbing children. "Found someone who knew you. My husband sent you, didn't he?"

"Yes," I said.

"Can I trust you?" she asked, continuing to soothe her children. "I have no one else to turn to."

"You can trust me. But I'm not sure why you should believe you can."

"No choice," she said with a shrug. "I want you to take Sydney and Kent, Jr. back to their father."

Both children said no, but Joyce wasn't listening.

"At three in the morning?" I asked.

"I just murdered William Stark," she said.

Kent, Jr. turned his head into his mother's shoulder. The little girl looked down and bit her lip.

"I've got to go back to the room and call the police," she said. "Take my children home. My husband, for all his faults, is a good father. I don't want them involved."

"How about you and I go out on the balcony?" I said. "The kids can watch television."

She looked at both children, seemed to understand, and told the

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children she would be gone for just a minute. They clung to her, but she managed to pull away gently.

"Be right back," she said, following me through the door after I handed the boy the remote control and checked my pocket to be sure I had my door card.

Even at three in the morning, the atrium wasn't empty. Five men were seated eight stories down, talking softly. A crew of cleaning people were sweeping and scrubbing. Joyce Sizemore was looking down across the open space at the closed door of her room.

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve, took a deep breath, and said, "He tried to take me in front of the children. He hit me, pulled my hair. He'd gotten up during the night. He was drunk. There was a knife on the table. We had forgotten to put the dishes outside the door after we had room service. It was a steak knife. I told him to stop. He didn't. He grabbed my wrist and laughed. We were standing there, just . . . I twisted my arm and pulled free and then I brought the knife down three, four times. He looked surprised. I hated him. I wanted to keep . . . You know the rest. I'll go back and call the police. You take care of my children, please."

"You're sure he's dead?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then it won't hurt if I go take a look. You go back to your kids and give me your room card."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I'm asking you," I said. "I won't take long. If the phone rings, it'll be me. Answer it."

She brushed her hair back with her long fingers and pulled the room card out. I took it and let her back into my room. The television was on. An old Dick Van Dyke rerun where Rob goes off to a cabin to write a novel was on in glorious black and white. The episode, as I recalled, was funny. Sydney and Kent, Jr. weren't laughing.

I went down the fire stairs, made sure I wasn't being watched, and made my way to the room on the seventh floor. I opened the door and wiped it clean with my shirt. Then I kicked the door closed. The lights were on and William Stark lay on the floor, bloody, eyes closed, in his T-shirt with the picture of a grinning cartoon turkey on the front. The turkey was covered in blood. Stark was naked from the shirt down.

I didn't touch anything. I looked around the room and into the bedroom and then I leaned over the body. I didn't try to count the stab wounds. There weren't a lot of them. The knife, not a particularly long one, lay bloody-bladed not far from the body.

There was a cot in the room with a pillow and blanket, and a Hide-A-Bed with a teddy bear and stuffed elephant lying back on a pink blanket. Some blood had splattered on the Hide-A-Bed.

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I checked my watch and started for the door.

The moan wasn't loud, but it was clear, and it came from the supposedly dead William Stark. I went back to the body and knelt. Stark's eyes opened and moved in the general direction of my face. I didn't bother to tell him not to move as I lifted the bloody T-shirt to get a closer look at the wounds.

There were four of them. I should have just called 911, but a few minutes probably wouldn't make much difference. At least, that's what I told myself.

"You'll be all right," I assured him as I examined his wounds.

He looked around the room as if he had no idea of where he was.

Two of the stab wounds were to the chest. I gently touched them. Neither was deep. Both appeared to have been stopped by Stark's ribs.

The third wound was almost at his right shoulder. I couldn't tell how deep it was, but it was into muscle, not much chance of being fatal. The fourth wound was the problem. It was on the left side of his stomach. There was plenty of blood, but I couldn't tell how deep it was or what had been hit.

"You'll live," I said. "I'm going to try to stop some of this bleeding. Then I'll call an ambulance."

His right hand came up suddenly and gripped my wrist. For a dead man, he was damned strong. I tried to pull loose as he croaked, "No ambulance. No police."

"Noble," I said. "But you might be dying. You want to live?"

He took a second to think about it and then nodded yes and let go of my hand.

This was all wrong. I had known it from the moment Joyce Sizemore entered my room with her frightened children. Stark closed his eyes and I leaned over to be sure he was still breathing. He was.

I picked up the phone, not worrying about fingerprints any longer, and dialed my own room. Joyce answered before the second ring.

"Yes?" she said with a quivering voice.

"It's me, Fonesca. Get down to your room, fast. Leave the kids there."

"What . . . ?"

"He's still alive," I said.

She didn't answer and I had no time to talk to her now.

"Fast," I said.

I hung up, checked my watch, sat on the bed, and said, "Stark, you still with me?"

His groan suggested that he was. I checked my watch. Almost a minute passed. If she didn't show I'd have to call 911. My voice would be on tape. I'd have a bigger mess than I already had.

The knock was soft, but it was a knock. I let her in. She was a

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ghostly pale, beautiful vision of white and blood red. I closed the door and she walked over to Stark, who hadn't moved.

"Bill?" she asked.

He groaned in response.

She turned to me and said, "I've got to kill him."

"You've got to call nine-one-one," I said. "You've got to call now. Just tell them a man has been stabbed. Tell them where we are. Don't answer any more questions."

She shook her head. I picked up the phone and handed it to her. I hit the three buttons.

I could hear a voice on the other end because the phone wasn't close to her ear, but I couldn't make out the words.

She said exactly what I had told her to say and hung up.

"Good," I said. "I think we've got at least five minutes, maybe more. I'm going to be back in my room with the kids. You understand?"

She nodded again, looking at the half-naked, bloody man on the floor.

"You want to tell me what really happened here or you want me to guess?" I asked. "Faster if you tell me."

"No," she said, clasping her hands together to keep them from shaking.

"Okay," I said, determined to be out of there in three minutes. "You said he hit you. There's not a mark on you. You said he tried to attack you in front of the kids, but your robe is bloody and I don't see a tear in it or a button missing. You stabbed him while you were dressed. Which kid?"

"Which . . . ?"

"You woke up, heard sounds in here, and came in. Which of your children was he going to molest?"

Stark groaned again and something like words gurgled from his mouth.

"Kent," she said wearily. "The night-light was on. He was sitting on Kent's bed, his hand on Kent's chest. Kent was half asleep. I told you Bill had been drinking while I was asleep. I could smell it across the room. I took the knife and . . . the rest of what I told you was true."

"Does Kent know what Stark was trying to do?"

"No, I don't think so," she said. "He seemed to wake up, both of the children seemed to wake up, when I stabbed him."

I checked my watch and moved to Stark.

"Stark," I said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," he said with a groan. "Get an ambulance."

"One's coming. You were drunk. You tried to commit suicide. I'm going to give you the knife so your prints are on it."

He shook his head.

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"Suit yourself," I said. "Then the whole thing comes out and you're labeled a pervert. Not a chance an Orlando prosecutor would take this case to court, especially if you don't die, which you won't. Mrs. Sizemore will walk away with her children and you'll be all over the newspapers and television. You want that?"

"No," he said, his face contorting in pain.

"We have a deal?" I said, checking my watch. Florida police had been under fire for months over not responding to 911 calls quickly enough. I had the feeling that my time was running out.

"Deal," said Stark, so softly that I could barely hear him. "Who are you?"

"Nobody," I said. "You've never seen me. Understand?"

He coughed and nodded.

I turned to Joyce Sizemore.

"You came out here. Saw him stabbing himself. You could tell he was drunk. He fell to the floor. Your kids were crying. You called nine-one-one and remembered that you had seen me, an old friend of your husband's, in the hotel. You called me, brought the children to my room, and came back here to wait for the ambulance and police. You understand?"

"I . . ." she said, looking at Stark, who was attempting to sit up.

"Mrs. Sizemore," I said. "If you want to keep your kids out of this, you better remember."

"I'll remember," she said.

I put the knife in Stark's hand and closed his fingers over it. I doubted that anyone would bother to check the story, but it didn't hurt to be sure. Some of the wounds might make a medical examiner think they weren't self-inflicted. Stark would have to insist that they were, but that he couldn't quite remember. Even if a smart cop thought something was screwy, he probably wouldn't pursue it. These people weren't rednecks in a cheap motel room. Class still has its privileges.

"I'm going," I said. "They'll be here any second. You'll be all right."

It wasn't a question, but she answered more strongly than I expected, "I'll be all right."

I moved toward the door.

"Wait," she said.

I turned toward her. She moved to the cot, picked up the teddy bear, and handed it to me. I understood. I went out and moved fast, without running, toward the stairwell. Below, out of sight, I could hear the sound of voices in the lobby. I ran up the one flight and came out close to the wall, where I couldn't be seen by anyone eight flights below. I made my way to my room, opened the door, and found Sydney asleep on the sofa next to her brother, who was nodding off as he watched the end of the Dick Van Dyke episode. In her sleep, Sydney took the bear and clutched it to her chest.

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"Mr. Stark is going to be okay," I said quietly.

Kent looked at me.

"He tried to kill himself," I said. "He had been drinking."

"I don't like him," the boy said. "Sydney doesn't like him. He smiles, buys us stuff, but he's a fake. We told Mom. She wouldn't listen."

"She's listening now," I said. "What did you see?"

Kent didn't hesitate.

"I was asleep, but I saw Mr. Stark stab himself and fall down. Then Mom took us to your room. Is that right?"

"It's right," I said.

"Sydney doesn't remember anything," the boy said, looking at his sister. "She remembers seeing Mr. Stark on the floor and Mom bringing us here."

"You want to get some sleep, Kent?"

"Yes," he said.

"There's a bed in the other room," I said.

"I don't want to leave Sydney. She might get up and be scared."

"I'll carry her in and put her next to you."

That seemed acceptable to him. I picked up the girl. She smelled clean. She smelled like a little girl. Kent walked slowly into the bedroom and watched me put his sister down. Then he climbed into the bed, put his head on the pillow, and fell asleep almost instantly.

It was just a question of how long it would take some cop to knock at the door to my room. My story would be simple, always best to keep it simple. Friend of Joyce's husband, taking a few days off to enjoy the Orlando glitz; ran into them in the elevator. Then she brought me the kids. I didn't know Stark. I didn't know what he was doing there. Joyce would have to swallow the truth on that one. It wouldn't be too painful. The cops would probably just go through the motions. No need to do anything else.

I was halfway through a Diet Dr Pepper and an ancient rerun of a Bob Newhart show when the knock came.

"Chili here is great," said Kent Sizemore, Sr., digging into Raoul's special.

This time he had it with double onions and cheese.

Everything had gone pretty much the way I had laid it out. Joyce had told her story. Stark had told his tale of attempted suicide. I doubt if the cops believed it or cared. Stark's wounds looked worse than they were. He was in and out of the hospital in two days. I guess his insurance program wouldn't cover more unless he suffered life-threatening brain damage or decapitation. Stark hadn't come back to Sarasota. I'm fairly sure he didn't stay in Orlando or the state of Florida.

Meeting me at Raoul's had been Sizemore's idea. He had paid

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me in cash, including a generous bonus, before we ordered. I had gone for the regular burger with onion, tomato, and cheese.

"How are things?" I asked.

Joyce Sizemore and the children had been back for almost a week. I hadn't called him until the day before this meal.

"Not bad," he said. "Could be better. I think Joyce is going to leave me. I don't think she'll fight for the children after what happened."

"That what you want?"

"No," he said. "I want my wife. I want my kids to have their mother."

"No chance?"

He shrugged.

"You going to work on it?" I asked.

He paused, spoon almost to his mouth, and looked at me.

"Now you're a marriage counselor?"

"Let's say I've got an investment in your family now."

He cocked his head to one side, put the spoon in the bowl, and clenched his large fists.

"You're not going to shake me down for more money," he said.

"No. I like your wife. I like your kids. In an odd way, I think I might even like you."

Sizemore looked at the bowl in front of him, sighed, and pushed it away. "I'll do what I can," he said.

"A real marriage counselor might be a start," I said.

"Can't hurt," he said. "I'm going now."

He got up and held out his hand. I took it and he left. I was working on my burger and beer when Siegfried Donnelly, a small, skinny, grizzled old hanger-on in need of a shave and a comb joined me at the table and sat across from me. I ordered him a beer and burger.

"Struck it rich?" he said.

"Enough to pop for a brew and burger, Sig."

Sig had once been a pharmacist in Holland, Michigan. He liked to talk about tulips. He didn't like to talk about why he wasn't a pharmacist and why he wasn't in Holland, Michigan.

"Heard you went to Disney," he said with a serious look on his sun-dark face.

"Yeah," I said.

"Always wanted to go," Sig said, shaking his head. "Might make it some day."

"Good luck," I said, holding up my mug of beer in a toast.

He lifted his mug.

"Fun there, huh?" Sig said.

"I'll never forget it," I said.

Sig smiled with the few teeth he had left and his eyes went moist with a vision of magical rides and singing dwarfs. ●

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Fire in the Grass

by Kandis Elliot

I awake in darkness between midnight and dawn, and I don't know what woke me but something catches my eye through the window, out on the back lawn, way back by the fence, and I see it is bright, a glow in the very dark shadows, and it wavers subliminally, a ball of light hovering above the grass. I at once think the grass is on fire. I rise and wonder if it is in my head, and I stand at the window and squint and peer because of my bad eyes, but the light stays there, and flickers, very out of focus, and so looks like a nebulous sparkling ball to me, but again I think, fire! I hear nothing but crickets. Now I am convinced it is not a dream but truly there, and dismay and fear and confusion go through me like great forces picking me up and slamming me against a wall, great forces, a great evil force. To investigate more closely, I grope my way through the dark of the bedroom to the living room and then to the kitchen, and am stopped there on my way to the back door by the kitchen window. I look out again at the backyard. The fire is gone. The yard now holds nothing but the darkness of middle night. I look and look, then go back to the bedroom and there is the fire out of that window. The window is open to the summer air. I smell no smoke. I hear no flames. Only crickets. A breeze rustles the backyard oak, rising between me and the silent, flickering fireball.

"This story is based on two true incidents," writes Kandis Elliot. "I gave the suspect (in the story) my eyes, and the fire I saw out the window one night, which caused a minor panic until my husband realized what I was actually seeing. The other element is animal abuse. We had a recent case here that was quite horrifying." Ms. Elliot's story is a reflection on the question: Why would someone commit such acts? †

As Sheriff Sam Jones gave the screen door a knock, he glanced over his shoulder at the Dodge County Wildlife Preserve. Tall-

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grass prairie was a hazy ocean in late-summer Monday morning light, across the gravel road from the erstwhile trailer camp of Koepke Heights. Abruptly the door opened wide.

"Come in, Sam. Been watching fer ye." A matron oozing grandma charm under Einstein-shaggy hair waved him in. At her knee, a young waggy-tailed mongrel dog gave the sheriff of Dodge County a cautious, and thankfully quiet, perusal. Sam took note of the dog, and also glimpsed a gray cat that gave him an even more cautious look-see before retreating behind the couch. Good, Sam thought. Everyone's still here. Vanished pets had brought him out the last time. And the time before.

"Mornin', Miz Fogliosovitch." He tipped his Smokey Bear hat, patted the dog, then followed her through the four-steps-wide living room. The house, like others back in this stretch of the county, was hardly more than a bungalow. Most were small trailers gone to ground after World War Two. Over the years they'd sprouted add-ons for children, elderly parents, occasionally chickens.

Sam Jones was familiar with cheap paneling covered with photos of babies, teens, weddings, old folks; TV trays and bookshelves a-jumble with worn paperbacks, bowling trophies, yard-sale lamps, whatnot dust collectors; old TVs with skirts of videotapes and local weekly newspapers; tiny kitchens overwhelmed each fall by Mason jars of tomatoes, pickles, beans, sauerkraut. Poor shanties; the lives within them nevertheless rich by virtue of living close to the land, with unpretentious traditions and expectations. For thirty-six years Sam Jones had also gone home to little wealth, few possessions, and Mason jars. Steady paychecks had never instilled in him a need for more living space or fancier furniture.

"Doin' the canning, are we?" He nodded toward sealing Mason jars on the kitchenette counter. A pile of lickum-stickum labels were scribbled with the date and "tomatoes," "green beans," and so on. Sam smiled: glass jars obviously filled with tomatoes and such needing labels. Because that's the way it's done.

"How you fixed for spuds, Sam?" said the old lady.

"Dug three five-gallon pails just Saturday." He plunked himself down on the vinyl kitchen chair to which he'd been led and dodged having to accept a basketful of garden produce. Given his standing in a mostly farming community, not to mention his bachelor status and Chippewa-blood craggy dark features, his own kitchen already brimmed with tomatoes, cucumbers, spaghetti squash, mushmelons, and you-name-it. Most of it he forwarded to his ma, who would dole it back to him all winter long in her own Mason jars and freezer bags.

"Got some real nice eggplant—" She went to the refrigerator ("icebox," as she called it), poured two glasses of lime Kool-Aid,

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then gathered a paper plate of graham crackers. She centered the feast on the little kitchen table and sat down across from him. "Okra's just come on like gangbusters. You put in any okra this year, Sam?"

Sam gently steered the conversation away from gardening, the weather, the preserve across the road ("nuthin' but varmints and weeds; can't figger why the university gotta turn the whole dang county over to *will*-der-ness—"). He wiggled a boot at the dog, which had curled beside its mistress to keep one eye on the visitor and the other on whoever's hand currently held a graham cracker. "I see Little Mitzy's still here and kicking," he said. "Thought you called about another dog stole." They were always "stolen," of course. Cats, dogs, ferrets, and whatever else in God's kingdom humans could possibly consider a pet, turned loose to run all day and night, leash laws notwithstanding, in a rural scattering of ticky-tacky next to a wildlife area that encompassed nearly the entire county, but run off? *Oh*-no, not *my* darlin' Fluffy or King or Sugar-Puddy.

"I called on account of Irene Eisenstein's new pup, Sam. She was too shy to call you herself. I *tole* her to train that dog to her yard and keep a eye out, jus' like I do now. But I guess he run out the door afore she could stop him and that was that. We called and looked everywhere."

Sam Jones sighed and took a long drag of his bright green Aid. "Miz Fogliosovitch, y'know y'all can't just let critters go and take off, what with a jillion-square-mile wildlife preserve right across the road. Ain't a dog or cat alive won't head off into there soon's you blink, and get lost and starve, or wander up on the road and get hit by some pickup."

She dismissed these grim prospects. "I know you got more important business than stolen pets, Sam. But t'aint that. They's been too many gone to say they just up and run off." Little Mitzy, about to die of drool, was finally passed a cracker. "That puppy was too young to get far."

He thought about it for a moment. "Well, maybe you got a fox waiting to snatch a free lunch," he murmured, adding, silently, one that's learned to keep a sharp eye on nice folks who feed 'em table scraps in the mulch pile, garbage tossed out of sight into the big bluestem across the road, not to mention pig-fat puppies and kittens let out every evening to poop unsupervised.

LilyAnne Fogliosovitch took an indignant gulp from her own glass. "Wa'n't no fox got my Big Mitzy." All her dogs were a succession of Mitzys. Big had been a fifty-five-pound cocker spaniel bitch. "Maybe you think we got one 'a them sewer alligators out there in that waste of good cropland."

Sam smiled cynically. True, Big Mitzy—a butterball that would

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more likely have squashed any marauder as fought it—would have been too formidable for any Dodge County Preserve predators, which were limited mainly to common weasels, foxes, an occasional coyote and even rarer bobcat. "Well, I'll go check around. Miz Eisenstein the one lives in that red trailer?"

"Just two doors down," nodded Mrs. Fogliosovitch, appeased. "She probably won't be happy I called you. But like I say, they's just too many pets gone when you add 'em up. Why, I counted fifteen over the last three years."

Sam's cynical smile faded. "Fifteen?"

"That ain't counting them what we know got shot or run over, or et a fish hook or something." She began to tick off the unaccounted-for on her fingers. "There's my Big Mitzy and Gingerpuss, and now her puppy, and before that there was Marsha Bublitz's pretty calico with the loppy ears, and Bill Stolitzky's little terrier, and then, now let's see—"

Sheriff Sam Jones listened to the recital with one ear. Five pets a year vanishing in a community of less than thirty-five people. Was that a lot? What percentage of people have pets, anyhow? People generally give up on a lost pet after a few days' searching. A few will knock on neighbors' doors and maybe post some hand-lettered signs, but such losses, sad as they might be, are seldom reported to the county sheriff's office. This was the third missing-pet call from Mrs. Fogliosovitch, and maybe the fifth or sixth, in his tenure, from this whole community overall. His usual animal complaints involved livestock through the fence and on the highway.

The old lady walked with him outside. The morning fog had nearly burned off, leaving the tall prairie grass across the road misty with sun sparkles. Near his marked squad car he noted a wealth of animal tracks in the gravel dust at the edge of the road. "Look here, Miz Fogliosovitch. You got you a fox, a coyote, a whole dang family of raccoons, and that there's probably a badger. This place must be a zoo at night. No wonder little puppies vanish from under your noses."

"Sam, ain't one of us don't have our .22 or a shotgun out here, or our yard light—" she pointed to a motion-sensor light mounted above her side door—"or our alligator trap in the shed. Ain't no fox in this henhouse, I'm telling you, it's something funny going on. You talk to people. I think maybe someone's poisoning 'em. Or snatchin' 'em and selling 'em to the university for experiments. Maybe even—I hate to say it, but you never know—*eating* 'em. You just go sniff around. I want to know."

Sam Jones's hair rose at the thought of how many guns these rural folks probably did have. Every one of them—including, he suspected, old lady Fogliosovitch—took advantage of the pre-

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serve's proximity to go hunting and fishing, activities prohibited in the actual preserve. But even for those who obeyed that restriction, nearby fields and woodlots teemed with spillover game, which the tracks in the road verified. Any fox with designs on the numerous chicken coops—or puppies or kittens or garbage cans—that ventured into someone's yard after sunset would find itself first flooded with sudden light, and shortly thereafter peppered with number-two shot from the kitchen window, and then the yard dog would be turned loose. . . . The sheriff of Dodge County felt his hair stiffen further. He'd been in that poor fox's position on occasion.

Impelled by momentary identification with persecuted animals, Sam Jones walked over to the two-doors-down red house, another one-time small trailer that now sported a brand-new, classy deck taking up nearly as much ground area as the rest of the home. He didn't have to knock on the porch door before it opened to emit a thin, fiftyish woman in jeans and T-shirt.

"I *tole* her not to bother you, Sheriff," said the woman, who introduced herself as Irene Eisenstein. She parked Sam on the deck in a plastic lawn chair and reiterated the tale of the mischievous puppy. "I only had him for about two months. But he knew the area and he knew where home was, and he always come when I called."

"Didn't you keep him on a leash?" Sam studied the snapshot of Irene Eisenstein and Ookla the junior-grade greyhound, who had passed actual puppyhood months ago. She wore running togs; he sported a collar, red bandanna, and happy-dog grin.

" 'Course I did. LilyAnne said it was dangerous to let pets roam free around here."

He held up the snapshot. "Don't see a leash here."

"We were playing Frisbee that day," she said angrily, but quickly grew contrite. "Sorry, Sheriff. I mean, he was tied up whenever I wasn't walking or playing with him. Whippets require lots of activity. He could run and run all day."

Apparently he did, Sam thought. In a straight line.

She read the thought. "He was just so full of pep," she sighed. "I was busy hanging up the wash. He knocked right by me when I took out a load, but I thought, let him jump around the yard for a while. I was out there, and he didn't go far. But then I kind of, well, when I finished that basket I went in for the rest, and . . ." A tear crawled down her cheek. "After I got the wash all hung, I remembered him. Maybe a half-hour. He was g-gone . . ."

Back in his squad, Sam jotted a few notes and contemplated the situation. Sad. And explicable. The whippet was born to be a working racer, rejected as a pup because of some minor conforma-

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tion problem, and was just getting used to being a house pet. He was people-shy and would not have been easily coaxed into a stranger's hands. But he was a runner. He could have headed off directly into the preserve and still be coursing those vast prairies.

Nevertheless, that explanation would not necessarily hold for other pets. Sam decided to check households in the area to see if anybody else felt that missing critters constituted a legitimate concern for the community. He left his squad in front of Mrs. Fogliosovitch's house and strolled down the road.

Koepke Heights consisted of twenty dwellings scattered on one side of the gravel frontage road, a straight county trunk. None of the homes was in any alignment to another, some ten, some twenty yards in from the road, with a good fifty feet separating the lots—the original settlers liked breathing room. Most had weedy, short-mowed front yards. The backyards were small patches of grass, old sheds, and ratty box elders. A dozen more homes formed a second tier behind the first line, along a circular access road edging a hillside woodlot like a wall behind the community. Tenants were retired couples and singles, welfare moms, disabled vets, loner blue-collar bachelors, tough-as-nails middle-aged bachelorettes, a few poor young families, most happy with their simple lives and plain little houses, which more often than not also featured American and Green Bay Packer flags, Weber grills, battered pickups, and well-loved Harleys.

Eight of the twenty lower-tier dwellings had someone at home. Sam Jones briefly asked them about the missing whippet, and whether they'd had any pets vanish. Two of the eight affirmed that yes, now that he mentioned it, their pets did indeed vanish very mysteriously. A goldfish vanished right out of its bowl (this in a house with two big cats), and a parakeet vanished on a hot summer day last July when the birdcage was opened and so were all the windows. ("But he never flew away before!")

By ten A.M. Sheriff Sam Jones had finished the interviews and, he decided, the case, when he noticed that a lawn-care truck had pulled up behind his squad.

A shirtless young man in work-worn jeans pushed an empty wheelbarrow back to the truck. "Guy ordered five rolls of sod," the teen explained in response to Sam's query. He thumbed toward LilyAnne Fogliosovitch's next-door neighbor. The nicely kept home was an early Wausau prefab. Modest, hardly more than an efficiency apartment on a concrete slab. Sam had just visited three others like it, save for paint and other personal touches.

He looked at the scorched, weedy front lawn, contiguous with the other September-burned, neglected lawns along the road. "Five rolls for this?"

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The kid laughed. "Naw. Backyard. Guy says a fire killed a patch of grass back there."

Sam considered the hundreds of illegal burning barrels he'd turned a blind eye to (he had one himself). Nothing odd there. But his mind was churning on missing animals, and one thing that makes them missing is incineration, and besides, no one had answered his knock at this house. A junk-heap Subaru still squatted in the two-rut dirt driveway. No new car had arrived. "Someone home?"

"Yeah—" The kid pulled a crumpled receipt from a back pocket. "Gary Van Nye. He showed me where to dump the sod, but I dunno. I think he just wants good grass under a big shade tree. Tree lawns are our best customers."

Sam wrote down the name on the signature, then retraced the lawn-care worker's path to the back of the house.

A young man barely in his twenties was carefully unrolling a sod rug. He looked up at Sam's hail with eyes distorted through strong prescription glasses.

"Yes, Sheriff?" he said politely, wiping his hands and rising to meet his guest.

"You Gary Van Nye? I knocked a little while ago but nobody answered."

"Really? Yes, that's me. I was out back, guess I didn't hear. I had a little trouble, as you can see." His was one of the few fenced backyards. A large, spreading oak erupted from just off-center, shading nearly the entire space. A row of old lilacs inundated the equally old chain-link fence all along the back. The grass, what there was of it, suffered shade from above and drought from tree roots below. None of it looked burned from a fire, however.

"What kind of trouble?" Sam asked.

"Fire. A couple nights ago. See how it got this corner back here?" He indicated the back corner near the lilacs.

The nearly windless day cast dappled shade over grass that was stunted, yellow, and shriveled. It might have been a little more sere near the lilacs than closer to the house, but not overly so. Sam's quick eye made an additional check for anything that looked like a recent small grave, but the entire backyard seemed hard packed and diggable as concrete.

"How'd you know it was a fire?"

The young man blinked at him. One eye had worse vision than the other; its prescription in the glasses made it appear skewed and shrunken. "I saw it. Late at night—" he pointed to the smaller of two windows set in the rear face of the house. "From my bed. It didn't last even long enough for me to get out the hose or anything."

Sam walked over to the indicated window—glanced in—

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bedroom—and looked back. The yard was quite barren: large tree, one of those big-number outdoor thermometers nailed on it, waist-high fence that would keep most animals out, lilacs. The two-rut dirt drive Sam and the lawn-service boy had used led through a wide gate, now open, and continued to a rear shed that might house a compact car, were it empty. Its double doors also stood open, revealing a workbench, tools, lawn mower, gas can, and other backyard-shed equipment. That's where Sam would have expected a fire. But Mr. Gary Van Nye had pointed to the opposite corner, nearly straight behind the big tree. Sam wondered if Van Nye could read its thermometer even with his glasses. If anything was going to torch the lawn, those prisms might do it.

Sam asked about the runaway whippet and whether Van Nye'd had pet problems, to which he answered negatively. "Sorry, Sheriff. I work rotating shifts at the hospital and my hours are just too cockeyed. It wouldn't be fair to a pet." He explained further about being a part-time custodian at the university's huge research-hospital complex.

"Quite a drive for you," Sam observed.

"Been doing it for years." He looked at his little piece of earth. "This was my grandfather's. It's cheap, and besides, I like living out here. Quiet. Private. People don't bother you." He frowned sourly at the "burned" grass. "Except for this. I think it was ball lightning, though."

"Maybe."

Sam left the young man to his sod-unrolling, headed back to his squad, and made himself start thinking about lunch. But dog and cat thoughts kept churning through his mind, and added to them was this young nitwit who thought his grass had started on fire. His lawman's sense of smell wasn't pricked as much as were deeper, older instincts within his heart that could always sense when something in the world was unnaturally skewed.

"Dang, but I just got the creeps, Sasquatch," he said to the county's Ford LTD law enforcement sedan.

I awake. It wakes me, the fire. What the hell, I think, and am immediately stricken by my unfortunate choice of epithet, and fear goes through me as I sit up in bed and look out the window and see the fire in the grass, my new, green, alive, moist sod, my happy new grass, my baby lawn, afire! Fear comes to me—the unfortunate epithet—the fire—fear grabs me by the nape and kicks my ribs and I ask why? why? why are you doing this? and I am kicked again. My ribs crack and I am thrown against the wall with fear and desperation but I can't get away and I see the fire calm in the calm night, in my new grass, what could it be? Of

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course, they nurture it with chemicals, force-feed it chemicals, and then it was cut and slabs like meat excised from the living body, fumes like blood released, chemicals and methane gas, the soul, ignite. A will-o'-the-wisp, a glowing ball in the darkness in the back corner of my yard, bright and shiny, calm in the calm night, burning. Is it on my grass? Or coming from beneath? The fire looks back through my window, at me.

Sheriff Sam Jones eyed the familiar, large but still cramped office as he bolstered himself for the inevitable cup of tea, now doing whatever it is tea does under its mitten. (What's he call it, a "cozy"? Grown man fiddling with something called a "cozy.") Overhead, like a sword of Damocles, a six-foot-long bluefish from both the Madagascar trench and the Devonian swam on wires eye-bolted into the ceiling. Walls were hidden by a library of books nestled among stuffed birds, dried upended starfish, classroom models of bisected beetles and plant ovaries. The floor space was occupied by yet more biological grist, from bubbling tanks of crawdads to an articulated tapir skeleton (Sam only knew that from its label) to a giant lizard whose sinuous tail masked iron reinforcing rod that had tripped many a guest—including Sam—who'd decided to pace while Professor Charles D. Farnsworth diddled with his absurdly British tea ritual.

Sam often visited the university biologist when he had cases involving either animals or the Dodge County Wildlife Preserve, its supervision entrusted to Farnsworth as one of the more dreaded wildlife defenders in the university. Seeing Wisconsin wilderness, Sam long ago decided, had morphed the professor into a raving tree-hugger. Something to do with his coming from England, which the sheriff envisioned as a patchwork of country castle estates, sheep farms, and quaint stone fences. Although, Sam thought, studying his longtime friend, he does work to keep up a BBC image, right down to tea, tweeds, and that accent, which Wisconsinites often had to work to decipher. You'd think a guy here for over a decade would've learned English by now.

"Whaddaya figger, Charley?" Sam said to his host on the other side of the massive oak desk, also groaning under trays of seashells, fossils, books, student theses, and other college biology whatnot. "Something out in the preserve I don't know about could be snatching up their dogs and cats?"

"There have been occasional reports of cougar tracks, mainly in the Portage vicinity," Farnsworth replied as he poured the tea. Sam eyed the incongruity of a six-three, broad-shouldered guy who worked out like Schwarzenegger and carried a licensed Smith & Wesson .45 semi-automatic in his field jacket holding a pink-

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flowered teacup and dainty silver tongs. "And I personally verified the black bear sighting, as you recall. Sugar? Milk, surely?"

Sam took his cup with a shake of his head, although a shot of Jack Daniels would've gotten the nod if offered. "Ain't nothing like that in Koepke Heights," he said. "I'd've heard long before this."

Farnsworth nodded. "Well, then. Are the missing animals valuable? If there's pedigree involved, there's value, and thus motive for theft."

"Don't think so. These are kids' and old ladies' pets. Mostly barn litters. Probably all got fer free from people giving 'em away."

"The whippet?"

"Public relations giveaways. You can get 'em from track kennels ever since people learned what happens to racing dogs when they's wore out, or born runty or gim-legged." He slurped his tea. "Wait'll it dawns on folks what we do with dry milk cows. Next we'll be taking in ol' bossy to curl up at the foot 'a the bed."

Farnsworth smiled at the cynicism, deepening dimples in a face boyish even at forty. With arching brows over warm brown eyes, the professor's countenance held neither aloofness nor guile. Although Sam had seen him turn into a tiger when it came to fighting for environmental concerns, whether in Wisconsin or Sri Lanka, the law officer recognized a genuinely good heart when he met one. Despite the implication of the office displays, Sam knew that no animal, or human, had ever suffered under Charley's care and stewardship.

"Shall I venture out and peruse the vicinity?" Farnsworth offered. "I'd be keen to learn whether something untoward actually is in the preserve at that proximity to a—did you say this is a town?"

"Koepke Heights. Started out as a trailer court for seasonal workers, back when the canning factory run water and light out there so's they could keep the pea-viners going day and night during the harvest. Now it's about three-dozen social dropouts, retired folks, or them what can't hack town." Sam watched that explanation rattle around in Farnsworth's head a moment. Wish to hell he'd learn English, Sam thought, not for the first time.

"I see. Well, as far as the pets go, I suggest putting a transmitter in a few of them and—"

"*In* them?"

"Oh yes. We've dispensed with collars years ago. Simply inject the mechanism under the skin. They're amazingly small these days. We run the experiment for several weeks and wait for someone to 'vanish,' as your people claim. If a wild animal is taking pets, the transmitter will pinpoint the remains. If someone is stealing the animals, we could trace the pet, or if it was taken beyond transmission range, this would also suggest theft."

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Sam put his teacup carefully back on the desk, trying not to indicate he was asking for a second dose. "Well, what if the pet gets totally et up? Hair, hide, horns, 'n tallow? Won't the transmitter stop working?"

"Not at all. Unless it gets directly bitten—by a very strong jaw, mind—but most carnivores simply shear mouthfuls from the carcass. Big predators swallow small prey whole. Kittens are wolf candy." In a smooth motion he topped off Sam's rose-covered cup.

"Oh." Sam momentarily reconsidered his assessment of Farnsworth as a kind and gentle soul.

"In any event, we would have a recording station set up that automatically monitors the location of the chips. Should a signal cease out in the preserve, where the last transmission coincided with blood and hair traces, that implies natural predation."

"Seems a little extreme. But okay. Miz Fogliosovitch might volunteer her dog. I'll talk to some others about it." Sam studied the cup, wishing he could develop a taste for tea. He'd had plenty of practice, in this office. "Charley, whaddaya know about ball lightning?"

The biologist's eyebrows went up at the change of subject, but that didn't stop him from warming to it. Farnsworth, Sam well knew, would vent forth on any subject under the sun.

"A rare form of lightning in the shape of a glowing or fiery ball. Witnesses often describe it as red. I believe it's associated with thunderstorms, although not necessarily. Thought to consist of ionized gas. Very difficult to document. I shouldn't be surprised if a number of physicists consider it rather mythical." He leaned forward, intrigued. "Have you seen it, Sam?"

"No. But a lot of folks tell me they have. Especially up in the Dells area. Hellfire, they call it."

Two days later, Charles D. Farnsworth held up a pea-sized transmitter for Widow Abshagen's examination. "It's very small and, of course, painless. It will transmit for several months, and you might be interested in a printout graphing Bongo's daily routines."

Sam had let him do the explanations all morning. The process was just too weird to set right with most folks around here, and indeed, initial reactions to the idea, and to Farnsworth, were suspicion and consternation. A professor from that liberal, hippy, weed-and-vermin-loving university, and whoever heard of a name like that anyhow, and why does he talk funny? The pets themselves won their masters over. Sam was convinced there wasn't a beast on Earth that wouldn't acknowledge the Brit as the most loveable human alive, not to mention the great savior of its peers. Bongo, a twenty-pound, lard-ass neutered tomcat, purred like a bad bearing against Farnsworth's field boot, green eyes transfixed to the transmitter as if it were a sardine.

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Sam endured another five minutes of Widow and Bongo, learning how valuable the research was, how it would put the neighborhood's concerns at rest, and that the university, and, of course, Farnsworth himself, would be eternally indebted for their contributions. Like Mrs. Fogliosovitch down the road and Mr. Pietruszynski next door, the octogenarian enthusiastically agreed to have darlin' Bongo participate.

"You got a way with words, Charley," Sam murmured to the professor when Widow Abshagen went to fetch her glasses to read and sign a consent form. "If ol' Bongo ever waddles ten steps beyond his front porch he's gonna keel from stroke."

"Tut, tut," Farnsworth murmured back, "he'll make a good control. If the missing animals aren't running off, perhaps they're being snatched from their own properties."

If so, Sam thought, snatching Bongo was risking a hernia.

After Mrs. Abshagen signed, Farnsworth announced, "That's three participants now. One or two more should be enough for the task."

"Well," the widow said, "I think you got everyone I know. Have you tried the Van Nye boy?"

"He doesn't have a pet," Sam observed.

Her eyes widened. "Oh? My, I was sure I saw a little black dog in his backyard—when was it—just last Wednesday, I think."

Sam felt himself come to attention. "Are you sure?"

"That's the fenced yard, isn't it?"

This time Gary Van Nye answered the knock on his door.

"She said I had a pet? Oh, no, she must have been mistaken. Or maybe it was a long time ago, but like I told you, my work schedule would be too cruel—Oh, recently? Must have been someone else's dog. Once in a while one gets inside the fence and can't find its way out."

"You have problems with your neighbors' animals running loose, Gary?" Sam watched the fresh-scrubbed young face carefully. Van Nye had not invited his visitors in; rather, he'd stepped outside and closed the door behind him. "Seems folks' pets ain't been coming home. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Gary Van Nye's face was the epitome of innocence. "Oh, no. If one gets stuck inside the fence, I just open the gate. That's part of living in the country. I don't mind pets being out and free. I just wish . . ."

Sam waited. "What do you wish, Gary?"

Van Nye half-turned and stared at his rutted drive to the backyard. "I just wish my grass would stop burning."

"His grass has not been on fire," Farnsworth insisted as they slogged through the prairie in the vicinity of Koepke Heights. "Nothing in that yard had any evidence of heat damage."

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Van Nye had eagerly allowed both sheriff and professor to examine his backyard. Neither of them could find signs of any activity, either burning, digging, or pet-keeping. Sam doubted that Gary Van Nye so much as sat out there in a lawn chair to sip a beer. Only the new green sod was incongruous—the five rolls Sam had seen delivered two days ago, and five new rolls now overlaying them.

"Charley, how does that boy strike you?" He struck Sam with an ever-growing creepiness. So much so that the sheriff had suspected beforehand that any search out here in the prairie for signs of animal marauders would be fruitless, and so it was, save for his jeans' solid frosting of sticktights and burdocks.

Farnsworth halted his long, prairie-slogging strides. "Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "it has something to do with the poor sod's eyesight. Horrid myopic astigmatism there. Prisms like those he wears throw a simply awful distortion in the peripheral vision. It might be a case of him not seeing the state of his lawn very clearly. It is quite dry and yellowed. A common condition for the season, of course."

"He tole me he seen ball lightning out'n the backyard one night."

"Oh, really? Interesting."

"Yeah? You believe that?"

Farnsworth shrugged. "It's possible. Or perhaps a will-o'-the-wisp. That's methane ignited over anoxic decomposition—swamps and what have you. Occasionally they drift for quite a ways."

"Or maybe he saw Tinker Bell. Come on, Charley, the guy's a looney."

"That might be a harsh judgment. With his eyesight, who knows what he could have seen. Children hunting fishing-bait at night with an electric torch. A light in a distant window. If these night fires truly wake him up, he would first be seeing them without his glasses. The images would be blown all out of focus to him, distorted greatly and impossible to recognize."

"And then he'd quick put on his glasses to see it better."

"One should think so," the biologist conceded.

They started back for the squad. Sam owed Farnsworth a late lunch. The days were growing rapidly shorter; already it seemed deep afternoon, though their pet recruitment had taken but two hours and their nature hike just a few more. It would have taken Sam a few less, but Farnsworth insisted on being thorough.

"If the little bastard sees fire, Charley," Sam Jones mused as he drove back toward Madison in a cloud of gravel dust, "it's in his dreams."

Horror seeks me—repulsiveness objectified calls to me, captures me, and I am pierced and brutalized and thrown to the floor and I try to move to creep away, I don't understand what is happening,

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why this, to me? My breaths short as though a film, a hand, tight over my face; my breaths stopped against the obstruction, my lungs crying for air; surely it is only my pillow over my face as I sleep and in sleep I throw off the thing over my face and gasp in the cold autumn air filling my bedroom from the window ajar—

I awake. I know it is late, late, like the other times, after midnight, the hour of births and deaths, the witching hour, of deaths, and I must open my eyes and look at it, know it's out there again, always at this hour of deaths, and I look and it's out there. It flickers wildly, almost going out, the wind is up in the trees, blowing in a change in the weather, making the fire agitated, hungry, in need, desperate. I burrow down into my bed, my haven, my sanctuary, my warm sheets, and put my pillow over my head. I know what it is now. It is the flames of hell, for me.

On Friday the sheriff's boots clicked down the tiled, sterile hallway of the University of Wisconsin's research hospital. The sprawling edifice was renowned for transplant procedures and cancer research, as well as being a leading teaching hospital. Sam Jones now trod in the wing dealing with animal research, where, the front desk informed him, Gary Van Nye worked. That bit of information would have raised Sam's hair, had it not already been standing on end since the last time he chatted with the young man.

A woman hustled up the hall to greet him. "Sheriff Jones?" she said, extending a hand. She wore blue jeans and a plaid flannel shirt under an unbelted white lab coat. "Hi, I'm Mary Kozlowski. Front desk called and said you wanted to see me?"

"Just wanted to ask about one of your staffers, Mr. Gary Van Nye."

"Gary? He's one of the alternate custodians." Her gaze dropped from Sam's face to the badge peeking out from his open jacket. "What's he done?"

"He might be a victim of harassment." Sam didn't want to bring up his suspicions about animal kidnapping just yet. "He ever had any trouble in the workplace?"

"Gary?" she said, surprised. "Trouble? Oh, no, he's a real nice boy, real polite, does his work well, comes in on time—" She reiterated other platitudes describing a reliable, if unremarkable, employee. "He's standoffish. But I mean, all he does is mop the floors and empty the wastebaskets and things like that. I can't think of anyone who'd make trouble for him."

They strolled down the corridor, past office doors and labs filled with glassware, fume hoods, reagent bottles, scientific stuff. Some of the animal quarters were opened to worker comings and goings.

"Ever have trouble with the animals?" he asked.

"Trouble?"

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"Stolen animals, mysterious deaths, that sort of thing."

She nodded, knowing what he meant. "We're always on the lookout for those animal-rights fanatics. The hospital has tight security. We haven't had any trouble so far. Most of our research uses mice—not as inflammatory for protesters as monkeys and dogs. We're very careful with our animals, Sheriff. We have to file strict protocols for each test and adhere to mandatory regulations for humane treatment of—" She lapsed into a canned PR speech, which Sam cut off.

"Does Gary Van Nye clean the animal rooms, too?"

"No. We have animal-care specialists in charge of that. Only people with badges and keys get in the animal rooms."

Sam found himself venting an internal sigh of relief. No critter-snatching here. However— "How do you get animals, Miz Kozlowski? If there's a litter to give away, can you take them in here?" He doubted it, but he had to ask.

"Not since the dark ages," she laughed. "We're required by law to obtain research animals from biological supply houses. If anything, it goes the other way."

"Other way?"

"When we do a short-term, noninvasive study, the animals might be put up for adoption. They're not harmed or anything. Like pigs or calves will go to a farm. Our Easter rabbits—that's just cross-breeding trials—go to schōol 4-H projects."

"How about as pets?"

She hesitated, then in a resigned tone admitted, "Rarely. We did a heart-rate study with beagles, called 'em the treadmill pups. Those were given to families. And once we did a simple growth study on cats. Five brothers. We'd let them out in the hall once a day and play with them. They were so sweet. Everyone here wanted one."

"They went home with the staff?"

She hesitated again, contemplating his badge. "Sheriff, I don't mean for this to get anyone in trouble. Our giving animals away is probably not quite legal. But it's that or euthanasia. Just because we do this work with animals doesn't mean we don't care about them."

He gave a rat's ass about these people taking animals home. "Did Gary ever take an animal?"

"Two of the brothers. He just couldn't part with them."

The hair on Sheriff Sam Jones's neck was never going to lie flat again.

"I want you with me, Charley. I don't have enough for a search warrant, but if we can get him to let us in, you take a long look inside that house and tell me if there's any sign of animals. Animal black-market organs, animal-eating, and I mean eating as in

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barbecued poodle, and I don't know what-all. I just want to know what was every critter ever set hoof in there."

Farnsworth raised an eyebrow. "And how am I to determine that?"

Sam grabbed him by the elbow. "Smell them, for all I care. You're the animal expert. C'mon."

"We'll need collection equipment, sampling containers—unhand me, knave—"

"Just *look,* dang it."

The professor was unceremoniously hustled out his office door.

"I suppose," Farnsworth mused on the drive through dry September sunshine, "one could surreptitiously check the furniture to see if a cat had ever sharpened its claws on it. Certain bodily exudates are notorious carpet-stainers. And there is, as you noted, an odor to pet homes, although it would gradually fade to imperceptibility once the animal is gone. Are you allergic to pet dander, Sam? Or feathers?"

"No." Sam stared intently at the road ahead, only half listening to his friend.

"That leaves out telltale allergic reactions. If the floor is carpeted, we might somehow collect a sample of hair and other debris—I don't suppose we could examine his vacuum unnoticed? No, of course not—but if one of us could find some excuse to sit on the floor, it's likely our clothing would pick up—"

The radio interrupted the one-sided conversation. "Whaddaya got, Shirley?" Sam barked.

"Knew you'd want to hear this one, Sam. Just got an animal call from Mrs. Chojnacki, that big dairy operation over by the river. Says she wants you to investigate a missing Scottish terrier."

Chojnacki Farm was fifteen miles from Koepke Heights. "Jeez, Shirley, I already got too many runaway-dog calls—"

"Not a runaway, Sam. A giveaway. She had an ad in the paper to give the dog away, and guess who answered it?"

Sam glanced over to see the same cold look in Charles D. Farnsworth's quick eyes as he felt hardening his own. "Gary Van Nye took the dog?"

"Week ago Wednesday. And it seems Mrs. Chojnacki had second thoughts after talking with him and went out to see how her Scottie was getting along. Gary never answered the door, and she couldn't see any sign of the dog. Says that's why she got rid of it, barked every time someone came to her door, wouldn't shut up, kept pissing off guests. But no dog barks at Van Nye's place, and she went there twice. Finally talked to the neighbor and got an earful of this snatched-pet thing. Called here soon's she got home."

Sam thanked the dispatcher, rogered out, and turned to Farnsworth. "We got him, Charley. That there was a sign from God to go ahead with our plan."

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The biologist's voice was oddly hushed. "He surely knows about the transmitters by now. He'll keep going outside of the community."

"The Scottie lady probably put him on full alert, but we can get the warrant if we have to now." He stepped on the gas, foregoing lights and siren on the empty county road. "Whaddaya think he does with 'em, Charley?"

He glanced over at his companion's grim silence.

The house was small enough so that water could be heard running in the rear as Sheriff Sam Jones went to knock on the front door.

Gary Van Nye was aiming a hose at the sod sandwich in the corner of his backyard.

"At least he hasn't added another layer," Farnsworth murmured as they approached the young man.

Van Nye started at Sam's hail. He closed the nozzle valve and dropped the hose as he greeted his two guests. His mouth smiled. His eyes didn't. "I haven't had this much company in years."

Not human company, Sam thought. "I see you're keeping that sod nice and wet. Didn't have more fires, did you, Gary?"

A dark expression crossed the otherwise bland face. "In fact, I did." He pointed to the sod pile, which was so soaked it sat in a puddle. The top carpets were long and green, as were the visible portions of the under-pile. Even yard grass around the stack was starting to perk up from the muddy runoff.

Sam exchanged a look with Farnsworth.

"It appears you have it under control now," the professor noted.

"Do you know a Miz Chojnacki, Gary?" Sam said.

The face blanked. "No. Don't think so."

"Well, she seems to know you. Sez you answered an ad in the paper about her dog. A Scottie. You remember anything about that?"

"Oh, that! Sorry, I just forgot her name. Yes, I did see about the dog. I'd been thinking about a pet on the very day I noticed the ad. That's why I decided not to have pets."

Sam narrowed an eye. "How's that?"

"I'm just not around enough. It was gone the day after I got it home."

"Gone? I seem to recall you tellin' me you didn't have pet problems, Gary."

The young man shrugged. "I guess we do have a problem, Sheriff. Something from the preserve is coming for them. Didn't think it'd come during the day. At night, of course, the fire keeps it away. Tell Mrs. Chojnacki—that was her name?—that I'm very sorry." His warped, ringed eyes searched both men. "I had two cats once. They disappeared, too."

Little bastard figgered I would talk to his boss, Sam realized. Time to get inside the house. "You mind we come in and look around?"

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Van Nye's neutral, innocent expression did not change. "For what?"

"Check for breaking and entering. Someone might have stole your dog. Some criminals are so good, home owners never notice anyone's been inside."

"You didn't find anything in the preserve the other day?"

"No." He squinted upwards at the sun. "Hot out here. Glass of ice water would be real nice." It was a preplanned suggestion.

Van Nye gave in. "Of course, please come in. I'm so rude."

A small four-burner gas stove sat between a small refrigerator and a small free-standing sink, all typical of such rural bungalows. Cupboards covered the walls, a window opened over the sink. Sam held his breath as Van Nye opened the refrigerator, then its freezer, to get ice cubes for two glasses of water. A quick glimpse saw only icebox stuff, no severed heads or marinating terrier. The glasses were handed over without any apparent begrudgement.

A thick rectangular island, covered with a tablecloth, condiments, and napkins bespeaking its function, separated the kitchen area from the living room, which was equally spartan. Vinyl-covered couch, TV-tray end tables, television in a cheap rack with an old stereo tape deck below it. The floors were all tiled, standard for prefab homes built on poured concrete foundations. On the pretext of checking windows, sheriff and professor surveyed the single bedroom with its ostensibly fiery nightly view of the backyard. Twin bed, side table, three-drawer chest, minuscule closet. A bathroom across the short hall barely had turn-around room. A slightly larger utility room featured brooms, mops, wet-dry shop vacuum, and twin galvanized sinks attached to a small washer-dryer ensemble. Except for the quantity of cleaning agents, it was exactly like Sam's own utility room.

There was no sight, smell, or sign of pets.

"Did you find anything, Sheriff?" asked Van Nye. He seemed truly concerned about the scenario of a break-in.

Sam felt a twang of conscience. A man who thinks his grass catches fire every night might be prone to even worse flights of fancy about burglars. Could he be wrong about the guy? "Nothing, Gary," he said, adding, "With those window pins and bolt locks, I think you got the place pretty tight."

Van Nye's mouth smiled again. "I get it from my job. We learn security."

"And tidiness," Farnsworth added. "You are quite the housekeeper, I must say."

A shrug. "My job again. Say, Professor, do you think anything can be done about ball lightning?"

"Ball lightning? Oh—the fires. How many times have you witnessed this phenomenon?"

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"Half a dozen times in the last two weeks. I'm losing sleep over it."

"I should say. I'll look into it."

Van Nye nodded. "Not that I really mind it, you know. It's, well, almost like a little pet itself, now."

They departed through the back door, leaving Gary Van Nye to finish watering his sod.

"Talk to me, Charley," Sam said as they sat in the squad.

"The house was clean. Literally. The floor tile was practically burnished, the walls were scrubbed nearly through the paint. The stove, refrigerator, sink, any surface not covered with a cloth, it all sparkled."

"Yeah, you couldn't find a mouse turd in that place. But he is a janitor. Could be he takes his work home with him."

"The table and dishcloths were like hotel towels. Washed hundreds of times, reeking of bleach and dryer scorch. The lad has a fetish that would shame a parasitologist. I hardly see him tolerating such messy things as animals."

"I'll agree the only animal in there now is that squirrel Van Nye." Sam scrunched down in the seat, and Farnsworth allowed him a quiet moment of rumination. "Charley," he said at last, "you got any plans for the evening?"

"What did you have in mind? Not that you're my type."

"Let's go fireball-hunting tonight."

Wisconsin evenings around the autumnal equinox still glowed well past sunset with twilight; in this gloaming, the Dodge County sheriff's vehicle, its lights off, crept along the gravel road to Koepke Heights. A mile from the first home, it turned off the road and into the preserve. Prairie swallowed the vehicle at once. It pushed through curtains of big bluestem to halt directly in front of Gary Van Nye's house. By then, the road that formed the preserve boundary, its line of houses, and the upper tier of hillside homes above were cloaked in darkness.

Sam Jones and Charles Farnsworth relocated to the car's roof, where they could observe unobstructed over the six-foot-tall grass heads.

"Somebody's still up," Farnsworth noted.

Sam watched activity along the road on the upper tier. Faint voices barely reached their ears. "Betcha they're calling the dog. —No, I see it." He focused binoculars on a couple and their dog visible in a yard light. "They're going in now."

Most residences were already dark, or lit with softly flickering television glow. "Hello," Farnsworth said, "there's someone waking up."

Sam turned his glasses on a yard light that had just ignited at a house previously dark. "That's one of them motion-sensor lights."

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He scrutinized the newly lit area. "Don't see anyone. Those things could be triggered by a possum. It'll go off in ten, fifteen minutes."

It did. Another one further down the road went on, and off. Lights remained on in the hillside dwelling, but the rest of Koepke Heights eventually slept.

"Only the pets are out now," Sam murmured in the stillness.

After a while, Farnsworth noted, "It's about time for Mr. Van Nye's fireball."

"Or his dream. Do you think the guy could be a sleepwalker?"

"We'll know when he sets off his own yard light."

Sam searched his memory. "I don't think he had one—"

The background crackle of the car radio abruptly broke to summon the sheriff. Sam hopped down. As he took the call, his gaze was impelled to the one lighted house on the hill.

Why can't I feel it burning? The pain is absent, yet oh how the wounds demand it; the constant question, why are you doing this, the confusion, the anger, the hatred—all these require pain, and there it is out my window again tonight, fire, for me, waiting, calling, come out to me, come. Oh, fire, to burn, to be consumed by something, yes, so fitting, a warmth, finally, that will shed light on the darkness here, that will heat the deep cold here, I need the act. I should be feeling pain. I do not. I should. I must. The wounds demand it. The evil, the horror, the unspeakable, picks me up by the nape and kicks me, my abdominal wall splits, my guts spill, I am thrown forcefully against the walls again and again, my soul emblazoned with rage and loathing and dread, I clean the walls of blood, I mop the floor of forced defecation and little teeth, the remnants of heinous evil. I wash so hard, the stain indelible, the floor worn and worn away. The fire burns outside my window. Clean. Pure. Expurgation for the putrefying soul. Come to me, I see it burning out there, flickering, beckoning in the night, its bright fire beringed with refracted halos inside the jelly of my poor eyes, come to me, I know what I must do now. I cry out to it. Yes, I come.

Sam sat across from the couple on their worn sofa and waited while Mr. Gorski comforted his wife. The coffee table between them was strewn with snapshots.

"I don't understand it, Sheriff," Mrs. Gorski choked. "She never goes off all by herself. I always know right where she is—" The sobs reignited.

"She's a good girl," Mr. Gorski affirmed. "And she knows her way around the neighborhood, and that she shouldn't go out in the preserve. I can't understand it. It just isn't like her."

Sam held one of the photos from the coffee table. It was a birth-

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day-party snapshot of eight-year-old Maureen Gorski, all gray eyes, bangs, baseball cap, and tomboy togs, clutching a miniature collie that held a ball in its mouth. Sam looked at the same dog now lying under the table, its head on its paws and its tail curled tightly around it in a distressed hug. Six hours ago it had left on an after-school walk with its young mistress. The collie had come back alone. The sheriff's office received the call after the parents had searched the area, phoned all the relatives, classmates, playmates, and did everything but conclude that their good and obedient daughter had actually disappeared through no volition on her part.

He rose and joined Farnsworth by the patio doors, looking out at the night and the one yard light on in the darkness below. "I called the preserve helicopter," the biologist said, tucking his cell phone into a jacket pocket. "They can start a floodlight search in the nearby prairie in an hour, from the research-station airfield."

Sam nodded. "Search-and-Rescue's bringing the sniffer dog in their chopper."

The two men shared a look. *They're already too late.* "I'm going down there, Charley. You stay here."

Farnsworth stopped him. "The yard light." He gestured down the hill toward Gary Van Nye's place. The house and fenced backyard were dark. The light came from Van Nye's next-door neighbor's place, LilyAnne Fogliosovitch. "Let's watch a moment longer to see what's moving around down—Good Lord!"

A blinding flare suddenly banished the darkness, resolving at once into flames rocketing into the air, exploding from the twice-sodded corner, illuminating the big oak, the lilacs, the whole of the fenced backyard below.

"Call Fire Rescue!" Sam bellowed at the Gorskis as he headed out the door. Fire Rescue couldn't get out here in less than twenty minutes. He sprinted down the hill, Farnsworth at his heels; in tandem they jumped Van Nye's yard fence. If he had really heard screaming it was now lost in the roar of the flames. "The hose, Charley!" He gestured to the garden hose Van Nye was using earlier; Farnsworth was already cranking the spigot and aiming the nozzle toward the still-roaring flames.

"Van Nye! Gary! Get out!" Sam yelled as he leaped through the open back door. The house was dark; he almost flipped a light switch before thinking about broken gas lines. His flare-blinded sight restored itself as firelight through the door and window illuminated the whole kitchen and confluent living space. The same light spilled through the bedroom and into the hall. A frenzied search found no one in the house. The light began to die; Farnsworth was getting the fire under control.

"Sam," Farnsworth called from the yard, "out here!"

He ran back through the house. The neighboring yard light,

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pathetically dim by comparison, now vaguely lit the yard. It was enough to see the scorched, empty gas can, the steaming, soaked carpet of sod, and the charred body spread over it like a sacrifice on an altar.

"Ah, please," Sam Jones pleaded, "don't let it be her."

Farnsworth bent over the wholly lifeless body. "It's not," he said, and held up heat-shattered prismatic glasses.

Despite rivulets of sweat oozing down his temples, Sam felt a chill creep up his backbone. Silently he turned and trotted back into the house, this time hitting the light switches. "Maureen," he called. "Maureen, it's Sheriff Jones! If you can hear me, make a noise!" He and Farnsworth checked every room of the little house within seconds. It was still clean.

No, it wasn't. About to dash through the kitchen en route to the squad still parked at the Gorskis', Sam caught up short. His eyes by their own will pulled to the long, deep island separating the kitchen area from the living room. Its tablecloth was clean, squarely placed, tidy. Barren. Those things normally found on a kitchen table now resided in a heap on the stove. Gary had forgotten to replace them. How messy.

Farnsworth followed his gaze. In a motion, he yanked the cloth from the bulky divider. The true nature of Gary Van Nye's dinner table stood revealed.

"A freezer," Farnsworth breathed.

Sam jerked up the lid.

Maureen Gorski occupied the top spot. Two other occupants beneath her also had plastic bags over their heads, in which they'd suffocated before freezing. The rest, those that could be seen without unpiling because Sam could not have touched them, had been deposited unadorned, scooped up as much as possible, guts and brains and eyeballs pushed back in, divots of fur replaced, fractured bones reinserted, torn limbs aligned. Nearly, but not quite whole: whatever had been left on the walls, floors, Gary Van Nye's boots, had been scrubbed to oblivion. For a few of the little faces Sam found names he never thought he'd recall. Big Mitzy. Ookla. Gingerpuss. Marsha Bublitz's pretty lop-eared calico. Bill Stolitzky's little terrier. The brothers. Scottie.

He finally looked at Farnsworth. The kind face, ashen, eyes shut, had already turned away.

Eventually Charles D. Farnsworth worked out an hypothesis about Gary Van Nye's fireballs. Sam let himself be talked into spending an evening with the biologist to stake out Van Nye's house again, this time from the frontage road.

Farnsworth checked the luminescent dial of his watch just after midnight. "It's about the right time. If we don't get a response

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tonight, we should try again in a week. It might take awhile for things to settle down, after all the activity centered here."

Sam stretched stiffly. They'd been sitting in the dark for two hours. "It'll be a tourist attraction for years. I just hope the neighbors don't pick tonight to torch the place." He looked around uncomfortably at the near-total darkness. It was a three-quarter-moon night, overcast, breezy; late-October frost started to whiten Koepke Heights's trampled lawns.

"Ah. There we go."

Sam squinted at the sudden brightness of Mrs. Fogliosovitch's yard light. The lively form that had tripped the motion sensor trotted unperturbed on its way to LilyAnne's garbage can. "Raccoon. So what?" When he agreed to resume their fireball-hunting, he'd thought that maybe Farnsworth, if anyone, could conjure up an actual will-o'-the-wisp.

Farnsworth got out of the squad, sheriff in tow as he headed for the Van Nye house. "Animals are creatures of ritual, Sam. Even more so than we. They walk routes, have home territories, want a structured and orderly life. This marauder has probably visited local scrap heaps at this time of night ever since he first discovered them. And that discovery, I theorize, coincided with the appearance of Mister Van Nye's fireballs."

Sam removed the security padlock from the front door and they entered the darkened house, flashlights taking them to the bedroom.

"There you have it." Farnsworth pointed through the bedroom window.

Sam looked out. The neighboring yard light did not illuminate the backyard. Only a faint glow reached the fence and trunk of the big oak, casting shadows barely discernible from the night. "What's supposed to be out there, Charley?"

"Gary's fireball."

"Say what?"

"See that reflection of the yard light on his outdoor thermometer?"

Sam found a tiny sparkle on the plastic casing of an otherwise invisible thermometer. He hadn't even noticed it. "That's what he saw? I barely saw it!"

Farnsworth handed him a pair of eyeglasses. "Gary's prescription. Look through them and your eyes will see the world more or less as Gary saw it without them."

Sam put on the heavy prisms. The world immediately warped and tugged at his perfect vision. Nothing was sharply delineated but seemed to consist of a dozen overlapping edges. He had always expected bad vision to be simply blurry. That wasn't the case. Things were—warped. The reflection, hardly more than a splash of light, distorted into a multi-layered, vastly enlarged, arachnoid

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spark that had no discernible location, save that it resided somewhere between the window and the wall of shadow that was the back-fence lilacs. A stronger gust from the breeze stirred the thermometer slightly, making the spark flicker.

"Okay, I get it," Sam said. "If that's how he saw the reflection, I guess he wasn't dreaming."

"And at about the same time every night. That would add an eeriness to it. It wasn't there earlier; it would not be there later."

Sam returned the glasses. He wanted to get out of the house. "That don't explain it," he said, heading for the door. Farnsworth knew what he meant.

"No, it doesn't explain it. Gary added his own meaning to what he saw." They exited into the frosty night, breathing deeply of the cold air as though they'd both been holding their breaths during the interlude. The yard light timed itself out. In the darkness Sam listened to Farnsworth's voice with one ear while he contemplated the chain of events that seemed to finally tip Gary Van Nye off the edge of madness, into immolation.

"We don't know the causes of progressive conduct disorders," the biologist explained. "Sometimes they seem to be obvious—a cruel and sadistic parent, a bad early environment. But so very few people with even horrendous childhoods become a Gary Van Nye. And on the other hand, very dysfunctional personalities have come from loving, well-off homes that produced other normal children. We do, however, see a correlation with animal torture in childhood and serial killing in later life."

"I knew that," Sam said quietly. His heart had known about Gary Van Nye, even if his brain had no evidence at the time. That the lunatic had stopped himself from becoming a serial killer of humans instead of animals did not help Maureen Gorski. Nor did any act of the sheriff of Dodge County, whose job it was to protect the defenseless against such atrocity. When he and Farnsworth had crept into the prairie to watch for fireballs that night, she'd already been in the freezer three hours.

"Ironic," Farnsworth mused, "that an animal set in motion events leading to an animal abuser's demise. Whatever Gary saw in that light, it evidently triggered some spark of conscience. Perhaps he was a tortured soul too."

Sam Jones got in the squad and slammed the door. "You're too damn forgiving, Charley. I hope he's burning in a special room in hell. One with the souls of all the little animals he's ever killed." ●

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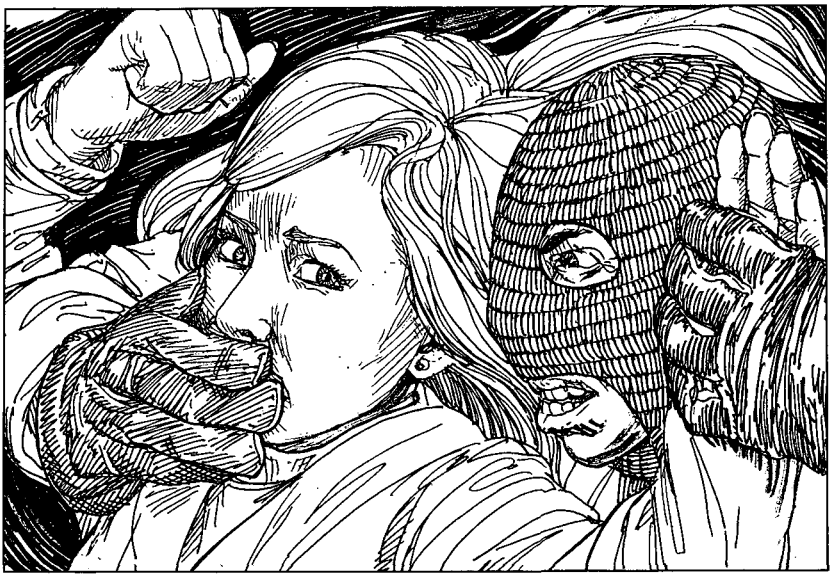

Art by Allen Davis

KIDS TODAY

by David Housewright

There were two stiffs on the floor and two kids soaked with blood standing over them and all the Minneapolis homicide cop wanted to know was: "What were you thinking, taking a teenage girl for a client without permission from her parents?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," I told him.

He looked the girl over. She had cradled her dead father until the cops pulled her off and his blood had stained her blond hair, her cheeks, her shirt, her shorts, her long willowy legs, yet she remained impossibly beautiful.

"Yeah, I bet," the cop said and grinned.

"It was because she couldn't go to her parents that I took the job," I insisted. Only he wasn't listening. He knew my kind, sure he did. An overstimulated, middle-aged private eye perfectly willing to risk license revocation for the opportunity to engage in unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor; happens all the time. Only that's not the way it was, and I wanted him to know it. 'Course, in my defense I could have mentioned the ten Ben Franklins she had dealt faceup on my desk blotter—1,000 bucks—but I didn't.

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"Tell me about this," the cop said, gesturing toward the bloody scene. The mechanism that is a homicide investigation was in high gear and humming along. Officers in plain clothes and blues shot photographs, took measurements, examined bloodstains, and asked questions while the M.E. examined one of the bodies; I'd bet he couldn't wait to get to the other. In the opposite corner, two officers were standing on either side of a twenty-year-old white male, his bloodstained hands cuffed securely behind his back.

"I got the call about an hour ago," I said.

"From your client . . . " the cop inserted.

"Yeah, Rachel Hartman."

"The seventeen-year-old girl," he said, emphasizing "seventeen."

I took a deep breath, chose to ignore the insinuation, continued.

"She told me she was afraid," I said.

"And you dropped everything and rushed right over," the cop said.

I nodded. A policewoman was now at Rachel Hartman's side. She gently took the girl's elbow and ushered her away from the bodies to a chair on the far side of the living room.

"What was she afraid of?" the cop wanted to know.

"She wasn't clear. Something to do with her father and a gun."

"This gun?" he asked, holding up a 9mm Glock in a clear plastic bag.

I shrugged.

The cop's gaze drifted from one body to the other.

"Which one is her father?" he asked.

"They both are," I told him.

"Really," he said, expressing about as much surprise as if I had told him the Twins had dropped another one. "Care to introduce me?"

"This is Rachel's stepfather, Steven Palke . . . " I said, pointing to the body on the far side of the room, the one whose face and chest had been turned to jelly by the shotgun.

"The millionaire computer entrepreneur," the cop added, expressing the unofficial title that would probably be attached to Palke's

In 1996, David Housewright's mystery novel *Penance* (Foul Play Press) won the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Novel. The book introduced Holland Taylor, a P.I. based in the Twin Cities. Holland has gone on to star in other mystery novels, including *Practice to Deceive* (Foul Play), which received a nomination for the Minnesota Book Award. This new case is Holland's first appearance in a short story.

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name in the obituaries.

"Uh huh. And this gentleman," I said, gesturing toward the older man with three ugly bulletholes in his chest, "is Rachel's birth father. Abe Hartman."

The cop's eyes widened. He knew Hartman's unofficial title, too.

"Abe 'The Cleaver' Hartman?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The gangster?"

"Yes."

"Yikes."

"You know, I said the very same thing when I was told."

"What the hell is going on?" the cop wanted to know. So I told him. . . .

Earlier that day Rachel Hartman came through my office door as if she had expected me to be waiting for her.

"Are you Holland Taylor, the private investigator?"

That's what it said on the nameplate so I doubted she'd believe me if I told her I was Robert Mitchum; probably wouldn't know who Mitchum was anyway. She was dressed for business in black pumps, black hose, black skirt, black blazer, and white shirt with notched collar, and she was wearing her blond hair up the way some office matrons do. But there was no disguising her youth. She reminded me of a little girl playing dress up. A very pretty little girl.

"Exactly how old are you?" I asked.

"I'll be eighteen in a couple of weeks," she answered without hesitation—I would have guessed younger. "Only please don't say you can't help me until you've heard why I've come."

Rachel's request came in a voice that made me guess others of my profession had already given her the bum's rush, as well they should—minors are not legally bound by contracts, and working for them can be both ethically and financially dangerous. But I liked the way she came into my office alone; the way she met my eyes without turning away; the way she stood with feet apart and hands on her hips as if daring me to throw her out. You don't often see that kind of self-assurance in America's youth these days, so I nodded my head, gestured toward the chair in front of my desk, and told her to talk to me. Besides, she was cheerleader pretty and I was enough of a dirty old man to appreciate it. . . .

The homicide cop gave me a knowing guffaw. Yeah, he knew my kind.

"I want you to investigate my stepfather," the girl told me.

That was different. Usually young women come to me for background checks on their boyfriends.

"Isn't love grand?" the homicide cop asked.

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"You want to hear this story or don't you?"

"Sorry, sorry. Go on."

"Why?" I asked her. "Why investigate your stepfather?"

"He wants to adopt me," she said. "He wants me to take his name."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not necessarily," she admitted. "He loved my mom. At least he always treated her like he did. She died two months ago."

"I'm sorry," I told her.

"She had a brain tumor."

I winced at the thought of it. "I'm sorry," I repeated.

Rachel sighed and bowed her head as if it was a subject she had lingered over too often for too long. I changed the subject.

"How does he treat you?" I asked.

"Like his most important asset," she answered, her head coming up. "My stepfather uses business terms in casual conversation. Mom was his partner. Their marriage was a merger. And he said acquiring me was the best part of the deal."

She smiled briefly; I nearly missed it.

"Anyway," she continued, "after Mom's death, my stepfather said he wanted to adopt me; make it official; give me his name; make me his heir. He said he wanted to make sure I'd never have to worry about money or anything else. You probably know his name. Steven Palke? He was in the news just a couple of days ago."

Familiar, but I couldn't place it.

Rachel said, "Nine months ago Steven bought eighty percent of a computer software start-up that was on the verge of bankruptcy, a company that was trying to develop a more efficient browser for the Internet. Last week these guys in Washington—the state, not the city—bought the company *and* the browser system for seventy million dollars; I think they want to keep it off the market. Steven earned fifty-six million on the deal and was hailed as this financial wizard."

I did some quick recapping: "Your stepfather loves you, treats you well; he's worth fifty-six million bucks and he wants you to become his heir. I don't see a problem here."

Rachel took a deep breath. She answered with the exhale.

"I was kidnapped nine months ago," she confided. "It wasn't in the papers; the police weren't notified; it happened during the Thanksgiving Day break so none of my friends or teachers knew I was missing. . . ."

I started to take notes.

"A dark-colored van pulled up next to me while I was on my way home from school. A man wearing a black hood jumped out, grabbed me, pulled me inside. I screamed, but I guess no one

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heard me. They blindfolded me, tied my arms and legs, and drove to a house with an attached garage—a split-level way out in the suburbs with white tile in the kitchen and new carpet."

"How can you be sure?" I asked.

"They didn't do a good job with the blindfold," Rachel answered. "They left a crack at the bottom." She placed a finger a half-inch below her eye to show me. "I could see what was beneath my feet."

"I meant, that the house was in the suburbs."

Rachel hesitated, then answered, "We drove for an awfully long time. At least an hour."

"Okay," I said.

She took another deep breath.

"There were two of them," she continued. "A man and a woman. I think they were married because they called each other 'honey' and 'dear'—they never used proper names. They were very kind to me, believe it or not. They never threatened me, never said they were going to kill me or anything like that. Also—and this is where things get goofy—they always referred to my stepfather as *Mister* Palke. It was Mr. Palke this and Mr. Palke that. One time the man was feeding me soup and the woman said, 'It's time to call Mr. Palke,' and the man said, 'Mr. Palke can wait,' and the woman said . . ."

Rachel leaned forward on her chair so I would have no trouble hearing her.

"The woman said, 'We don't want to make him mad.' Do you believe that? They kidnap his stepdaughter but they don't want to make Mr. Palke angry?"

It didn't sound right to me, either.

"Anyway, what happened was the kidnappers demanded one million dollars in ransom and gave my stepfather forty-eight hours to raise it—I could hear them talking on the phone. Two days later the kidnappers got their million bucks and I was dropped off at Minnehaha Falls, near my home in Minneapolis."

"So your stepfather came up with the money," I assumed.

"No, sir," said Rachel. "He could only get half of it on such short notice. I found out later that the rest—five hundred thousand dollars—came from my father. My real father. You have to understand that at the time I was just thrilled to get home okay, and then later my mom . . . Anyway, I didn't give much thought to any of this until I read the newspaper articles about Steven."

"What about them?" I asked.

"They pointed out that he earned the fifty-six million dollars on a five-hundred-thousand-dollar investment—an investment he made only three days *after* the kidnappers released me."

"And now you think that the kidnapping was a scam," I said, putting my highly honed deductive abilities to the test. "You think

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that your stepfather staged the kidnapping to defraud your real father out of the five hundred thousand dollars that he later put into the computer company."

"I don't know," Rachel said. "I think so, but . . . Could you find out for me? For sure, I mean? Before I agree to be adopted? Steven has already changed his will, and his lawyers are working on the adoption papers; he wants to file after my eighteenth birthday so my real father can't challenge it. But I don't want to be Steven's daughter if he's a thief and a kidnapper."

I was thinking that for fifty-six million bucks Saddam Hussein could adopt me. But then, I'm old and cynical. Rachel was not, and for a few moments I prayed that she never would be.

I cast aside all my reservations about working for the chronologically-challenged and did what later turned out to be a foolish thing.

I said, "Okay."

After hustling the girl out of my office, I turned to my notes. I was struck by how casual the kidnappers had seemed in Rachel's narration. They hadn't even bothered to use an outside phone. They were not afraid their calls would be traced; they were not afraid that they would be caught. This supported Rachel's suggestion that her stepfather might have arranged everything. And, I reasoned, he might have used a telephone to do it.

I had a hunch. If the kidnappers drove for an hour or more after they snatched Rachel, they not only might have driven outside the city, it's possible they had driven outside the local area code. If so, any calls Steven Palke made to them would be long distance and listed on his telephone records.

I turned to my computer. I'm not hacker enough for major spoofs, but the telephone company is easy; the telephone company is about as secure as a box of corn flakes. . . .

"Wait a minute," the homicide cop interrupted. "Are you telling me that you broke into the telephone company's computers!"

"Off the record, right?"

"Jesus Christ, Taylor," the cop muttered.

An hour later I was studying a laser printout. The Palkes had made seventeen long-distance telephone calls from their home in the month of November—eight to a Cambridge, Minnesota, number—during the days leading up to and immediately following the kidnapping. Cambridge is an hour's drive north of the Twin Cities.

I punched the number.

"You've reached Don and Judy Strickland," a machine answered. "We can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number, we'll get back to you."

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It took me ninety minutes to find the Stricklands' home using the phone book and an Itasca County map. I parked in the driveway. It was a split-level with attached garage—just as Rachel described—that had been built when they still put windows in garage doors. I peeked inside. There was not enough light to determine the exact color, but sure enough, the garage contained a dark-looking van.

I walked around to the front door. I wasn't sure what I was going to say when the Stricklands answered my knock. "Are you the couple that Steven Palke hired to kidnap his stepdaughter?" Something like that. Only they didn't answer my knock or the low screaming of the doorbell. It was five-forty P.M. by my watch. Perhaps they hadn't yet arrived home from work, assuming they still lived there. I wouldn't if I had a million bucks. I tried the doorknob. It gave.

Something was terribly wrong. My heart didn't stop and my blood didn't suddenly run cold, but I felt it just the same; felt it in a way that made me wish I was carrying a gun. I leaned on the front door and it swung inward slowly. A wave of cold air washed over me as I stepped across the threshold. The air conditioner was on high even though the weather was pleasant for Minnesota in August, seventy-five in the shade. I began to shiver.

I stepped into the living room. The carpet beneath my feet was new. So was most of the furniture; the place looked like it had been recently remodeled and refurnished. I called out.

"Hello! Anybody home?"

The kitchen was separated from the living room by a wide arch. I took three cautious steps toward it.

"Anybody home?" I called again.

I took another step, looked beyond the arch, and got my answer.

What was left of Don and Judy Strickland was sprawled across the kitchen floor. Someone had torn their bodies apart with a sawed-off at close range.

A sound like rushing air filled my ears and muscles clenched in my neck, shoulders, and legs. But I didn't panic. I closed my eyes and swallowed the air sound away; six or seven deep breaths quieted my heart and steadied my pulse rate. I had been a homicide cop in St. Paul and I knew how to do it, how to switch off my emotions and force myself into a kind of dispassionate mind-set in which dead bodies become little more than props in a stage drama, a work in progress. Only I must have lost the knack during the four years since I pulled the pin, because when I opened my eyes again the kitchen had become distorted: the walls and floor tile were now white light without borders, the splattered blood seemed to glow, and the bodies shimmered like a heat mirage on an asphalt highway. I shielded my eyes with my hand.

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In the distance I heard a sound like a barking seal. It was me retching. I turned away and walked deep into the living room. I tried again to desensitize myself to my surroundings. It took a long time. I couldn't get past the image in my head that Don and Judy Strickland were holding hands when they died.

Eventually, I went back to the kitchen and lingered long enough to determine that Don and Judy were killed early that morning—the kitchen table set for breakfast and frozen waffles ready for the toaster gave it away. Next, I checked the doors. No forced entry. That could mean the Stricklands knew their killer. It could also mean that they opened the door to a stranger and the stranger forced them inside with the shotgun.

I found an office on the second floor. There was a file on top of the desk but its contents didn't interest me—only receipts from builders, carpet layers, and furniture stores dated two weeks earlier. I began rifling through drawers. That didn't help me either. Impatiently, I looked up and around the room. Maybe the walls could give me a clue. To my astonishment, they did.

Framed in gold above the desk was a two-day-old article from the business section of the Minneapolis-based *StarTribune* with the headline: "Local Firm's Browser Wins Big in Worldwide Net War."

The article was accompanied by a photograph of a man sitting next to an elaborate computer system. Standing behind the man was a thirtyish couple that looked exactly like the Stricklands, except they weren't splattered with blood. The cutline read: "Facing bankruptcy just nine months ago, the firm owned by Donald and Judy Strickland and their benefactor, Minneapolis financier Steven Palke (sitting), was sold for seventy million dollars yesterday." Six paragraphs in, the story included the date Palke made his five-hundred-thousand-dollar investment—November 31, two working days after the kidnappers released Rachel. "Steven made it a wonderful Thanksgiving," said Judy Strickland.

I was in and out in fifteen minutes—fifteen long minutes—leaving nothing behind to place me at the scene; carrying away only another nightmare. I stopped at a convenience store on Highway 65 and called the Itasca County Sheriff's Department. I called direct instead of using 911 because I didn't want the conversation taped, and reported that there was something terribly wrong at the Strickland home. They wanted more information, such as my name, but I refused to give it. I didn't want to get involved. An hour later I arrived at the home Rachel Hartman shared with her stepfather.

It was an old house but not stately, big but not a mansion. Fifty-six million could buy about two hundred houses just like it in a community where you need an invitation to get past the gate.

Rachel answered the doorbell. She had changed from her black suit to a pair of white pleated shorts under a blue and

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white V-neck tee that somehow made her look older than she seemed in my office.

"What are you doing here?" she wanted to know. I pushed past her without answering.

"Is your stepfather home?" I asked.

"In the back . . ."

"Where?"

"Is there something wrong?"

I told her. She didn't take the news well. Her legs folded under her like an accordion and she collapsed at my feet.

"My father did it, my father did it," she repeated when I bent to pick her up.

That's what I was thinking, that Palke did the Stricklands to keep them quiet, although . . . Who were they going to talk to? And why? They made fourteen million off the deal. That's when Rachel told me about her father. Her *real* father. Abe 'The Cleaver' Hartman.

"Didn't you ask about him earlier when Rachel was in your office?" the homicide cop asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"It didn't seem pertinent at the time."

The cop began to chuckle, leaving me with the distinct impression that he didn't think much of my investigative skills.

"Talk to my father," she begged.

"Me?" I asked her. "You talk to your father. He likes you. Me he might shoot. Or worse."

"That's nonsense," Rachel insisted.

"Know how he got the nickname 'The Cleaver'?" I asked her. "When Abe was still a young man, the mobs in Milwaukee and Kansas City tried to take over his business. Hartman chopped up the shooters they sent and used their body parts to mark his territory, scattering arms and legs and torsos around the perimeter of the Twin Cities."

Rachel closed her eyes and covered her mouth with her hand; her body shuddered as if it was the first time she'd been told about her father, and maybe it was. I instantly regretted telling the story. But then I got to thinking. She already suspected that her father murdered two people with a shotgun. What did I have to feel guilty about? I told her to call him herself.

"I will," Rachel promised. "I'll call him later. But first you must talk to him."

"And tell him what?"

"Tell him that Steven had nothing to do with the kidnapping. Tell him that it was the Stricklands, all of it."

"Think he'll believe me?"

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Rachel thought for a moment.

"No," she said finally. "But he'll believe me when I tell him I don't want Steven harmed."

"Then tell him," I suggested.

She shook her head.

"My father believes in the code."

"What code?" I asked.

"The code, you know, about avenging wrongs done to your family and friends; about making sure people respect your family name . . ."

"You've been watching way too many movies, young lady," I told her. "There is no such code; there never has been."

"My father believes in it," Rachel insisted.

I told her I had my doubts.

"Mr. Taylor, if I ask my father not to harm Steven he'll have no choice," she said. "He'll have to say no because of the code. But if you tell him that Steven had nothing to do with the kidnapping and then I ask him, he'll say yes because then he'll have a choice. He can let Steven live and still save face. He won't believe me. But he loves me, so he'll do it."

"You're deluding yourself," I told her.

"Please, Mr. Taylor," she begged. "It's the only way I can save my stepfather. Please. I'll pay you more money."

"I haven't spent the money you paid me this morning," I told her. And that, ultimately, was the reason why I agreed to her plan. Until the thousand ran out, Rachel was still the boss. Of course, I could have given back the money, but that was unthinkable. You never give back the money. I know P.I.s who would stop drinking in the same saloons as I do if they heard I did such a thing.

The cop shook his head at me like he was disappointed.

Abe Hartman began his criminal career while still a child in the late nineteen twenties. He was a newsie working the lobby of the old Senator Hotel in Minneapolis when the FBI offered him fifty cents a week to note the comings and goings of the gangsters who stayed there under assumed names. Hartman promptly reported the arrangement to Isadore "Kid Cann" Blumenfeld, the gangster who controlled the "Minneapolis Combination." A grateful Blumenfeld told Hartman to take the deal and then paid him five dollars a week—a Depression-era fortune—to confuse the feds with false information that he supplied. It was the beginning of a near father-son relationship that lasted over three decades—Kid Cann even paid Hartman's way to Princeton University.

After Blumenfeld was sent to federal prison for white slavery in 1961, Hartman took control of the combination, running it with Ivy League adroitness and conservatism; always keeping a low profile, staying away from the clubs and social functions that

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Blumenfeld loved so much. The only time the *StarTribune* printed his name was when he married the daughter of a prominent Minneapolis banker thirty-six years his junior. So successful was he, in fact, that when the feds used the RICO statutes to bust him over a stock scam in '84, the local population was astonished. It was convinced that, except for a few Asian gangs, organized crime didn't exist in the Twin Cities.

All of this I knew. Rachel filled in the rest.

While Abe was doing his time in federal prison, his wife divorced him and was granted sole custody of their daughter. Abe did not contest this. He was sixty-four, with an uncertain future. The wife was twenty-eight, beautiful, and rich—she married Palke not too long after. When Abe was released after serving two-thirds of his sentence, he tried to reestablish himself in Rachel's life, claiming that he was retired from crime. His ex-wife forbade visitation just the same, and he was forced to watch his daughter grow up from afar. That frustration lasted until a rebellious Rachel turned thirteen years old and sought him out against her mother's wishes. They started visiting on the sly. Rachel's mother pretended not to know this, fearful that her protestations would only strengthen the bond between father and daughter. Instead, she confined herself to the occasional personal attack, often referring to Abe as "that jailbird" in her daughter's presence. Yet it was Abe Hartman to whom she and her new husband turned for help when Rachel was kidnapped, which made me think Mom might have been in on the scam, too.

I found Hartman's residence just off Glenwood Avenue near Theodore Wirth Park, and at first I figured I had the wrong address. It was a modest house in a middle-class neighborhood that was largely built in the fifties and had been declining ever since. I had expected something considerably more opulent.

I knocked. The front door opened the length of a chain. Half a face peeked through the crack. "Yeah?" the face said.

I flashed my ID, announced, "I'm Holland Taylor. I'd like to speak to Mr. Hartman."

"Mr. Hartman speaks to nobody," the half-face said and shut the door.

I knocked again. The door opened. "Get lost," half-face told me this time. The door closed before I could speak.

I took a deep breath and knocked again. This time the door flew open. Half-face became a handsome young man in his early twenties with brown hair, hazel eyes, and a snarl. He grabbed the lapel of my jacket with his right hand and poked the index finger of his left hand into my face.

"Listen, jerk . . ."

Before he could say more, I grasped his right hand with my left

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and yanked down. At the same time, I cupped his elbow with my right hand and pushed up. The pressure of the hold took him off his feet. I brought him down across the bottom of the door jamb and applied even more pressure, touching the tip of his elbow against his jaw. The pain in his shoulder joint had to be excruciating but he refused to cry out.

"What's this?"

I turned toward the question without releasing my hold. Abe Hartman stood in the hallway clutching a copy of *People* magazine. He was wearing a dark blue suit that looked two sizes too big on him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hartman," the young man replied between clenched teeth. "He took me by surprise."

Hartman grimaced in a way that made me think it was the worst possible answer the young man could have given.

"I apologize for disturbing you, Mr. Hartman," I said politely—yeah, like I was going to be rude to The Cleaver. "My name is Holland Taylor. I'm a private investigator working for your daughter. She asked me to speak with you."

Hartman gestured toward the young man.

I released the hold. The young man sprang to his feet and closed the door. He did not rub his shoulder, although I knew he wanted to. Nor did he mad-dog me, give me one of those "I'll get you" looks much favored these days by young men who feel they've been dissed. Instead he looked directly at the old man and waited for instructions. He had discipline. I liked that.

Hartman moved into the living room without speaking. The young man gestured with his head to follow Hartman and I did. The young man followed me—not too close, but close enough. He'd definitely be someone to step aside from once he gained a little experience.

"This is Vern Miller," Hartman said, gesturing toward the young man. "No relation to the Verne Miller whom I had the pleasure of meeting many years ago, the man who machine-gunned all those cops during the Kansas City Massacre in 'thirty-three. This Vern is considerably more able."

I nodded—what do you say to an introduction like that?

Hartman settled into an overstuffed chair as if he had spent a lot of time there. He gestured toward another chair across from him. I sat. Miller stood one pace behind and one pace to the right of me. His hands hung loosely at his sides.

"I met Verne—the first Verne, not this one—in what? Must've been 'twenty-eight, 'twenty-nine," Hartman said. "I was just a boy then, running errands for Mr. Blumenfeld; met him at the Cotton Club in Minneapolis—that was one of Mr. Blumenfeld's joints."

Hartman sighed, pleased with the memory.

The Cleaver was not at all what I expected. I knew he was in his

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seventies, but he looked much older than that. His hair was wispy and white, his blue eyes watery. And he was underweight. His five-five frame carried maybe one hundred pounds; like his suit, his skin seemed too big for him. He spoke as if he had a cold. I had to remind myself that he was a stone killer.

"The Twin Cities, especially St. Paul, was wide open in those days," Hartman continued. "As long as you paid the cops on time and didn't commit any crimes within the city limits, a guy on the lam was welcome to stay. John Dillinger, Homer Van Meter, Ma Barker and her boys, Creepy Karpis, Machine Gun Kelly, Harvey Bailey, Leon Gleckman, Big Ed Morgan, Jelly Nash: I met them all working for Mr. Blumenfeld. I didn't meet Al Capone when he was here, but I shook hands with Bugsy Siegel. Nice man. He was in town to spring a couple of his boys from Stillwater but he couldn't manage it. You can bet those boys lived pretty good in prison, though.

"Verne Miller loved to play golf," Hartman said, segueing into another anecdote. "Most of the bank robbers of that era loved to swing the sticks, except Nash—Jelly thought it was the dumbest game in the world. The feds knew this, of course, and they paid caddies and equipment managers to inform whenever the guys showed up for a round. That's how they got Bailey, Jimmy Keating, and Tommy Holden. They caught them on the eighth hole at Mission Hills in Kansas City. They almost got Dillinger, too, right over here on the Keller Golf Course in Maplewood. On the third hole, it was. But Johnny saw 'em coming and hopped a freight train that ran near the course, leaving his clubs behind. . . ."

I glanced up at Miller. He was listening intently, his eyes glistening like a baseball fan listening to Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio reminiscing about the '49 pennant race.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hartman," I said, real polite. Behind me, Miller made a sound like a growl. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm here on business."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Hartman. "My daughter."

"She asked me to speak with you on behalf of her stepfather."

Hartman snorted, spat the word "stepfather" like it was phlegm. The geniality he exhibited while discussing his misspent youth disappeared and suddenly there was no mistaking who Abe "The Cleaver" Hartman was.

"For fourteen years Rachel lived under his roof as a daughter and he does this!" Hartman said, his voice rising into a shout. "What kind of man kidnaps his own child?"

Hartman began to cough violently. He regained control long enough to say, "I'll kill the sonuvabitch." Then the coughing jag increased and he excused himself from the room. Miller made an effort to help, but Hartman waved him away.

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"How long?" I asked.

There was a deep sadness in Miller's eyes when he said, "A month, maybe two. The cancer is everywhere and the doctors can't help him."

A few moments passed and Hartman returned. He saw in my face that something had changed and looked accusingly at Miller.

"Don't blame him," I said. "It was an easy guess."

Hartman frowned slightly and settled into his chair.

"I was always afraid I'd get it like Dapper Dan Hogan in 'twenty-eight, blown up in my own car," he said. "Right now that doesn't sound like such a bad way to go."

I looked away. The man had been a criminal for seven decades, yet I was sad he was dying. Sympathy for the devil. Or maybe it was for his daughter. My emotions became all tangled and I had to force myself to focus on the job at hand.

"Mr. Hartman, your daughter says Steven Palke had nothing to do with the kidnapping. She says she doesn't want you to kill him."

"Is that what she says?"

"Verbatim."

Hartman snorted. "We don't kill people," he insisted. "Isn't that right, Vern?"

"That's right," Miller said without conviction.

"As if you ever did," I added.

Hartman smiled, coughed into his hand.

"My day is past," he said after coming up for air. "By the time I was released from prison the combination was gone. Splintered apart; no way to piece it back together. Even if there was, I didn't have the energy. Or the resources. The feds used RICO to take almost everything. I had enough to live on, no more."

"You had enough to give Steven Palke five hundred thousand dollars in cash," I reminded him.

"I didn't . . ." Hartman stopped as if he'd remembered something and chuckled; the chuckle brought on another coughing fit. "I didn't say I was destitute," he said when he recovered. "But that money was all I could raise; all I had left."

I glanced around the living room. It reminded me of the declining neighborhood in which Hartman lived. I believed him when he said he was broke; I was surprised he'd had enough for his share of the ransom.

"Your daughter said she would call you," I told him.

Hartman smiled.

"It's always a pleasure to hear from Rachel," he said. "We don't see her nearly enough, do we, Vern?"

Miller shook his head.

And I went home.

"Just like that?" the homicide cop asked.

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"Just like that."

"It didn't occur to you to warn Palke that his life was in danger?"

"I did warn him. Didn't I tell you?"

"You missed that part," the cop said.

"When I was here the first time. I told Palke that the Stricklands had been murdered, that Abe Hartman probably arranged it, and that Hartman was probably after him too."

"What did he say?"

"He told me I was mistaken. He said he couldn't imagine that Abe Hartman had anything against him or the Stricklands. I told him to have it his own way and went to see Abe."

An hour later Rachel called. She spoke breathlessly, her voice pleading. "I need you. Please come." I went.

I reached her home in fifteen minutes, driving at speeds that invited arrest. The sun had set by the time I pulled in at the curb. There were lights on in the house but I could see no one through the windows. Vern Miller was seated on the concrete steps leading to the front door. I was walking toward him when I heard the scream: loud, piercing, a female sound of great anguish.

Miller was up and through the door. I ran toward it. I had just reached the steps when I heard another scream, this one even louder. It was followed by the multiple sharp *cracks* of a semi-automatic handgun, something heavy—three shots fired. Almost immediately a single, hollow explosion responded. Shotgun. Another scream. Then another. I was through the door, down the hall, and into the living room before it faded into a low, aching moan. I found Rachel Hartman kneeling there, cradling the head of her stepfather on her lap; her arms and clothes were drenched with blood. The Glock was on the floor next to them. Across the room Vern Miller held the body of Abe Hartman close to his chest. A sawed-off Mossberg pump was nearby. Rachel was pleading with her stepfather, "Don't die, don't die." Miller didn't say a word to his employer. He wouldn't have heard anyway. Both Palke and Hartman were dead. Take my word for it.

"The Hennepin County Attorney's gonna love this," the homicide cop sighed. "Old-time mobster and nouveau-riche *financier slaughter each other for love of the daughter they both shared. Forget the local guys, this is the kind of thing that goes national. 20/20 might even pick it up. Just what I need."*

He was pissed and I didn't blame him. Nobody wants the media looking over their shoulder while they work.

"At least it looks open and shut," he added.

"Think so?" I asked him.

He stared at me for a good six beats before answering: "Let's see if your story matches what the kids have to say."

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Neither of us was surprised that it did.

Rachel buried Abe "The Cleaver" Hartman in Calvery Cemetery on the north side of St. Paul because that's where Dapper Dan Hogan was buried and that's the way Hartman wanted it. Only there were hundreds of mourners to bid adieu to the man who first organized crime in St. Paul and just a handful to salute Hartman. Like he said, his time had passed. Even the media had lost interest; a single camera crew shot the funeral and it departed before the finish.

Three people lingered at the grave after the rabbi muttered the final goodbye: Rachel Hartman, Vern Miller, and me. Miller was the first to leave. Rachel smiled weakly and thanked me for coming; she said it was thoughtful. I cut that off right away.

"I don't like being used," I told her.

"I don't understand," she said, but I knew she did.

"It looks like the Hennepin County Attorney bought your story," I told her.

She smiled slightly and looked off toward where Vern Miller was waiting next to a black limousine.

"You mean our story, don't you?"

"Yeah, I mean our story," I told her. "Did I tell it right; just the way you wanted me to?"

The smile never left her face, but there was an edge to it now.

"I have no complaints," she said.

"There's a hole in it, you know. A big one."

"Is there?" she asked, real coy.

"Big enough so the rest just won't fit."

"What?"

"You told me the Stricklands had new carpeting, new tile in their kitchen . . ."

"And so they did," Rachel said.

"Yes, but it was new two weeks ago, not last November when you claimed they kidnapped you," I told her. "I saw the receipts."

Rachel closed her eyes, smiled slightly, opened them again.

"My mistake," she said calmly.

"You hadn't been to the Stricklands' home until you went there to kill them," I added. "There was no kidnapping."

"You can't prove that," she told me.

"Palke struck it seriously rich and made you his heir," I continued. "But that didn't satisfy you. Like a lot of kids today, you want it all and right now. So you invented the kidnapping . . ."

"Mr. Taylor, you make me sound so . . . calculating," Rachel interrupted, enjoying the sound of her own voice.

"You killed the Stricklands. Why? Because in your story, your stepfather required accomplices, and who better than the business

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partners who would directly benefit from the alleged kidnapping. As for Abe . . . He had been out of it for a long time but his reputation lived on. You were counting on that. Who would doubt that Abe 'The Cleaver' Hartman would kill the people who kidnapped his daughter? Not me.

"So, you coerced Abe to your house; you had Vern wait outside while he and your stepfather spoke privately. Then you waited for me to arrive, the white knight riding to aid the damsel in distress. . . . "

"Nice metaphor," Rachel interrupted again.

"When you saw me arrive, you shot your father with Palke's gun, then killed Palke with the shotgun. I rushed in and found you cradling Palke's body. 'Course, at the time I didn't realize you only wanted to stain yourself with blood so the cops couldn't prove you fired the guns.

"And me? I was merely the narrator, the disinterested third party who put all the pieces together for the cops: you were kidnapped, Abe killed the kidnappers outa revenge, getting himself killed in the process. You have to admit, I made a helluva corroborating witness."

"You earned your money," Rachel agreed.

"How much do you stand to inherit? Fifty-six million?"

"Closer to sixty-five," Rachel said. "So what happens now? Blackmail?"

I told her: "You confess to the cops. Confess or I'll rat you out."

"To who?" she wanted to know. "With what evidence?"

I gestured toward where Vern Miller stood next to a black limousine. "The code, remember? Miller won't like it that you murdered his friend and mentor. He might decide to do something about it."

"Think so?" she asked softly. And then louder, "Vern, could we have a moment, please?"

He walked toward us.

"Vern," Rachel said when he was within earshot. "Mr. Taylor says if I don't confess my crimes to the police department, he's going to tell you all about them. I assume he expects you to punish me."

Miller smiled broadly.

"And I will, too," he said. "As soon as I get you home."

"Promise?" she asked.

"You're in it together?" I asked. "The two of you?"

"The three of us," admitted Miller.

"Abe?"

"Mr. Hartman had nothing but hard dying to look forward to," Miller said. "He wasn't happy about that . . ."

"And he wasn't happy that the business he and Isadore Blumenfeld had spent their lifetimes building had disappeared while he was in prison," Rachel added.

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"He set it up so we would have the resources to rebuild the combination," Miller said.

"It was his plan," Rachel said. "One last great heist. The perfect crime."

"He went out on top," Miller concluded.

"Yeah, with you carrying him on your shoulders," I said.

"It was his plan!" spat Rachel, outraged. "Don't you dare take that away from him. We helped, sure. He was too weak to get around. We had to shoot the Stricklands for him and in the end, I had to shoot my stepfather; Abe couldn't hold the gun steady. But it was his idea; his plan."

"Yeah, I figured that all along," I said. "I just wanted to hear you say it."

"What?"

"I knew he was in on it," I confessed. "He claimed he kicked in half a million for the ransom; he didn't have it. And you two . . ."

"What?" Rachel repeated.

"You two don't have the wit for this kind of caper."

"What are you talking about?"

"Too young. Too inexperienced."

Miller smiled. "Maybe so," he said. "But we have fifty-six million dollars."

"Sixty-five," Rachel corrected him. "And there's absolutely nothing you can do about it," she told me.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"Yeah? What are you going to do?" Miller wanted to know, clenching his fists like he wanted to pop me one.

I reached inside my shirt and removed the microphone that was taped just below my rib cage. I held it for them to see.

"I'm going to testify at your trial," I told them.

A moment later, a swarm of police officers led by the Minneapolis homicide cop crossed the cemetery to take them.

"A guy like Abe spends a lifetime learning how to act, what to do when push comes to shove," I told the homicide cop later. "But kids today, they don't know how to behave and they refuse to take the time to learn."

"I hear that," the cop replied.

"They don't even know enough to keep their mouths shut. Think Abe would have spoken so freely about murder?"

"Not in this lifetime," the cop agreed.

"Kids," I said contemptuously.

"Yeah, kids." ●

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PLUMAGE

by Alison White

France, 1587

"Did she really lose her head, Papa? Was she bald and twitching on the block?"

Detail after grisly, bloody detail. The boy Louis's words carry to me, even though I left them by the fireside when they began again with stories of the death of Mary, Queen of Scots. I cannot bear to hear the truth. For me, it is another dream broken.

They call her a murderess, but if so, then unlike me, she did so only for the good of her people. The plumage of royalty weighed heavy on her shoulders. The plumage of a fool weighs on mine.

More than seventy of Alison White's short stories have seen print and been broadcast on BBC Radio. If our sources are correct, however, "Plumage" is Ms. White's first historical crime story. The author made this departure from her usual realm of contemporary suspense at the request of anthologist Martin Edwards, who included the piece in an anthology he edited for the Crime Writers Association of Britain, *Perfectly Criminal 2*.

Much was expected of the young Mary. A queen at six days old. Yet, as a child, little was expected of me. It was even doubted that I would live.

"He is mute," they said. And for a long time I did not understand, then all at once I did, when my father tried to cure me, hoping to beat words out of me. I bled, blistered, and watched my skin rise red and raw in wheals, but still was mute.

"Why did God take Jacques, woman, and leave us with him? Cursed boy, even the plague would spare him." Father spat in disgust and slammed out of the house, leaving my mother watching sadly after him.

We lost my brother Jacques to a fever he had lain in for three days and nights. Until then he had spoke from morn till night and worked with my father in the fields. I would be no use there, Father said, and as he hated me I did not argue, so instead of being coloured by the sun like him and Jacques, I stayed lily white.

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"More like a woman every day," Father muttered, loathing me all the more. I had two sisters, but they died in infancy. He forgave me for surviving the girls, but would never forgive me for surviving Jacques.

That morning, when we woke and Jacques had no fever on his brow but no breath on his lips either, was the only time I had seen my father cry. Alone, as he thought, his heart gave way and I crept up beside him to offer comfort, only to receive another beating.

"By God, I'll make you speak," he said, with spittle on his lips and a look in his eye I could not fathom as he seized me by the throat and shook me.

And that was when the treatments began. The potions. Old crones in neighbouring villages would mix an evil-smelling phial of a brew that no apothecary would trust. With this forced down my throat, I would be tied to my bed for its magic to work overnight. The men of the village watched over me for fear of my bursting from the bonds to murder my family in their beds. I heard the crone whisper this possibility to my mother, who crossed herself with fright and held a rosary over me before the midnight-blue liquid was administered.

They spoke about me then, as they often do now, as though I cannot hear and do not understand. Yet I do.

It would not be madness, then, that caused me to commit murder, but rather the effect of the potions—giving fevers and sweats worse than even Jacques had suffered, enough to make me seek death myself as a blessed release from the agonies of the night.

But perhaps the crone had second sight and her talk of murder was prophetic. Possibly her potions even gave rise to my own gift. For it was during one such fever that I had my first vision. I saw myself flying.

Men and women watched me. Yet these were not the rough, worn, and reddened faces I was familiar with, but smooth-skinned and joyous, looking up at me and laughing. The light bounced and sparkled upon the jewels of the women as though they wore pieces of the moon itself.

In the morning I woke suddenly, to see my mother leaning over me, my father beside her.

"Wake up, my son," Mother whispered before Father roughly pushed her out of the way and me half to my feet, tearing at the bonds that still secured me.

"Speak, boy!"

But, of course, I said nothing.

The blow to my head sent me spinning across the room and I crashed against the table. Mother rushed to my aid but received a blow herself, then busied herself with food while I cried silently.

"They say there is another woman—" she began.

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"No!" With a roar, Father swept his arm across the wooden table and cleared it of its dishes and food. "Enough of hags with their magic and chants. Have you not learned that it does not work, woman?"

After that vision, though, I knew there was another destiny for me. I was to fly away before, in his desperation to make me speak, my father wrung the very last breath from me, in the hope that a word would join it. Even my death would restore his pride if I managed to speak just once. But how could I fly? And where to?

The answer came just days later, when Mother took me to a nearby village, supposedly in search of another crone and cure. "Shoo, Henri. Play!" she chided me, turning back to her toothless and pox-marked friend. The village had, until recently, been damned by plague. Perhaps she hoped any lingering remnants of the disease would attack my already weakened body and kill me. Then my father could blame her for my affliction no more.

I followed the children, who were laughing and excited. And then I heard singing! Not the raucous ale-fired songs I knew, but first merry and gay, then mournful and sad.

Around the corner they came, the travelling players, in clothes of colours so vivid they almost hurt my eyes. The colours of fruits, bright and sweet about their bodies as they sang and played their music with the beat of drums and a lute. One man dressed in red and yellow, his suit in patterns that split his body in half, a cap of velvet and feathers on his head.

Acrobats tumbled and jumped along, the children of the village scattered and parted a way for them to travel through. They had two carts pulled by horses and filled with even more laughing folk. Right at the back was a boy about my own age. Two of the acrobats threw him from one to the other. He started as a curled-up ball, then, reaching his target, flailed out his arms. Flying.

And then I was flying too. Tearing off my ill-fitting tunic so I was bare chested, I ran and tumbled with them. They laughed with delight, encouraging me. As we left the village, I leapt on the cart with them. I had flown my nest.

The players did not question my decision to join them. Provided I worked for my passage, they did not care whether I spoke or not. Many were escaping from something.

Arlon, the other boy, had been born into the group, his father and uncles throwing him through the air since babyhood, and he knew much more than I.

"I will teach you," he said. And at first he did, though he grew bored with a wordless playmate who evoked much sympathy from the womenfolk. A friendship is short-lived once jealousy sets in.

"Well done," he called as I had mastered a complicated tumble. "Father, come and see what the mute has learned now!" For

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nobody called me Henri anymore—how could they when I had no means of telling my name? I had shed it as easily as down-feathers.

But as his father came to see my new trick, Arlon spitefully moved so that I fell and twisted my foot.

"It will come, boy," said his father, ruffling my hair. But his voice was a sigh and I knew he was disappointed. Arlon's eyes were smiling.

"Tell him, mute," he whispered at me. Then laughed.

It was summer and the days were long and hot, the nights not much better. Arlon's breathing grew heavy at night, and by day he sneezed and his eyes itched. Sometimes his chest would rattle like the string on a lute worked loose.

The woman who cared for us crossed herself at night as he rattled on. "Pray 'tis not the plague."

The men mocked, but I could see as his night ills grew worse that they were worried. Had we not travelled through villages which once had been made barren by those poxes which swept our land? Hadn't his mother died young?

"If 'tis God's will to take a boy, then so be it," I heard one man say. "Do we not find it a struggle feeding two?" But he was hushed by the woman, who knew that although I did not speak, I always understood.

And I was scared then, seeing why she had gone without food to allow Arlon more. Feeding two growing boys cost them dearly. And while Arlon was ill, the players had not attempted the more spectacular stunts, feeling that I could not perform like him. If food was scarce, I feared they might abandon me.

That night I dreamed again. Of Arlon's corpse. Then of myself, in the plumage of brightly coloured costumes and hats, flying through the air like a bird, doing all the tumbles that Arlon did. Another vision. And hadn't I found the power to make the last come true?

Arlon worsened. The woman slept a little herself that night, unable to keep to her vigil of mopping Arlon's head, so exhausted was she from little food, little sleep, and his demands of the day. Her breast rose and fell as she gave a gentle snore some distance from us. Arlon's chest was rattling, but he was in a deep sleep. If he should wake as I crept by, his panic could be dismissed as a fever, I thought, but he did not. Just minutes after I had blocked his nose and mouth with my clothes, the rattle in his chest stopped.

I slept soundly after that. I woke to the sound of the woman crying. Arlon was dead. And my position with the players was secure.

I may not have been given the gift of a voice. But I had the gift of visions, which showed me a way of survival. A gift I would readily accept.

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I almost forgot this skill for a while, so busy was I learning the tricks of my new trade. Though I grew taller, my agility was strong and I could flex and bend to shapes that would make those who came to see us gasp. Around the fire at night I learned the lute, plucking out a melancholy song I would never sing as the flames cracked and hissed. And I learned the art of conveying much by saying little. My face could express any emotion.

I learned not only of my trade, but also of life. For people speak to those who cannot speak back, when your face tells them what they wish and no harsh words can spoil it. And did I have a conscience? Even if I had, I could not tell.

The news that the child queen had arrived in France was on the lips of every peasant. Much responsibility lay at her shoulders. Her husband chosen for her, she was to unite countries, and how we gambolled at the thought of performing at the French court when we were invited by the royal governor.

I dreamed of a laughing lion that night. At first I thought the beast was advancing to kill me, as its huge jaws opened and the slavering teeth came at me, but instead, his lips furled back and the roar was a joyous one. I awoke, remembering my previous visions, and tried to interpret this. It seemed clear. If I performed well, then the king would like me.

So I made it possible and gave the performance of a lifetime. Tumbling and playing, admiring the beauty of the king's mistress, Diane de Poitiers, and trying to catch the stars from the sky to give to her.

The king laughed just as I had seen, and I was asked to stay awhile.

When I first saw the young queen I could almost sympathise with my father, who had preferred my brother Jacques over me. For here was Marie, robust and healthy, with a regal dignity, yet even now she was promised to the sickly milksop dauphin. Water and wine.

Even then, her royal responsibility allowed her to be gracious, and she opened her heart to the weakling like no other would. I felt humbled by her dignity and acceptance of her fate.

The royal governor sought many groups of travelling players in search of new entertainment, and I could fit in with most, such was the variety of my skills. Then I was asked to attend at Anet, where the dauphin, princesses, and the little queen were travelling by barge.

It was an honour. Much had been said of the beautiful chateau of the king's mistress, fashioned in her favoured colours of black and white. And how the royal children enjoyed their time spent there, drawn to her beauty and the palatial surroundings of the chaste marble statues and memorial chapel.

Such fine clothes the children wore, velvets and damasks, embroidered caps, and ribbons that twirled as they danced in the

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morning sun. All this, I marvelled that day we entertained them in the gardens, was like one of my dreams, with the exquisite richness of colour and sound. There were bears and wild animals, too, but none impressed the little queen so much as the proud peacock that strutted through the gardens.

"That bird wears skirts like mine," she declared when its tail opened to reveal its exquisite feathers.

In the distance I played the lute, while she was told that the peacock was the male, and the peahen, the female, rather more ordinary and plain. Her answer was bright and quick.

"There must be a reason," she declared. "The peacock wears the plumage with dignity. It is the royalty of birds and has been chosen for the plumage."

"Yet the peacock has a dreadful cry," she was told by her governess.

"Then the plumage weighs heavy," the queen answered. "But when you have been given a path that is different from the rest, you must follow it," she informed the surprised woman. "Though at times it may hurt." She sighed heavily and pointed at me. "He, too, has been chosen. Without the plumage, the peacock is a dull bird. Without the crown, I am just a female. Without the mute, this group has no voice."

She could see what I had always known. I bent my head down over my lute so no one could see the tears in my eyes. I was unused to the sensation now. And it was at that moment that I fell in love.

Whilst cosseted in luxury, the young queen still had her enemies. Ordinary dull-looking creatures who sought to use her for their own ends and to gain power and privilege. Rumours of treachery and attempts to poison her reached even ears like mine in the different households of the royal court. How reckless people can be in earshot of a mute.

And then I had a vision that left me breathless in the night. In this, the children of the court were being entertained by wild beasts. Wolves with great jaws, who would howl, and three bears. But as the bears came closer, striking out with their great fat paws and ripping at whatever was nearby, I saw there were only two. The third bear, with the bloodiest mouth, was no bear at all. It was a man.

Searching for the meaning desperately, within days I found it. I heard two men of the household in grave discussion of the damage the wild bears had caused and the bills that would have to be paid.

"They must be sent away before any more harm is done," one insisted.

The second looked across the gardens towards where the queen played and smiled. "But no real harm has come to anyone." His

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smile, like the bloody mouth from my dream, made me shiver. And I knew what I must do.

The gardens were large and, in parts, lonely at that household, and when a man chances upon a fool, he expects foolishness.

"Away," he growled as I leapt at him as he walked alone beneath the trees. "Go!"

With his own sword, I killed him. The brown velvet cloak of that bear was stained with his own blood.

The children were sent to another chateau without delay and the death not spoken of publicly. The bears were removed, too, and the bills settled for their rampaging. My gift had served me well once more. My queen would not die at the paws of that bear.

I entertained many more times at court. Although I never spent time alone with the young queen, nor bore witness to her friendship, I felt a bond still. She had an understanding I had not encountered before or since. She and I both victims of the plumage God chose for us. Committing what would be crimes in the eyes of some along our life's path. And yet they were our destiny, there was no other way.

Now she is free of that in death and will be a queen forever. My plumage now fades, too. I can no longer bend and fly as I used to—the years have not been kind to my body. Although my face will still entertain, I am not as valued a player as I once was. And my spirit too has gone.

Her death has made me sad. I had another vision, the saddest one of all. I was walking amongst long grass and singing. Yes—in this dream, I had a voice, low and sad. First, I came upon the corpse of Arlon, my first victim. In fear, I turned round the other way, only to find another corpse—that treacherous villain whom I killed by his own sword. I fled and sought an old crone in the woods to whom I handed gold and mimicked a death by poisoning. With greedy claws grasping the gold, she handed me a small bottle and we laughed. Back on the hills, I took shelter by a tree and slept as though at peace, yet woke to the sound of a peacock's scream. I leapt to my feet and ran, looking to where the dreadful sound came.

And then I saw it. The body of the regal bird, lying bloodied there on the lawns, its tail ripped out and spread beside it, blood-spattered and spoiled. The beauty gone, colour seeming to drain from the rest of the body of the bird. A death scream as its plumage was lost.

I waited to interpret the dream, yet knew it was prophetic. And now the tales that have crossed the seas about the manner of the queen's passing have proved it so, reaching even little Louis. In paying for supposed crimes, stripped of even her hair in death. Yet never of her royal dignity.

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But let me not forget the poison. For it, too, was in my dream, and I, too, have a price to pay.

"Papa! Papa! The mute—I think he is dead."

His father roughly pushed past him, to see where the fool lay, mouth open and slack, eyes closed, and skin cold as ice.

"Ah well. That is the way, boy. Do not cry for him, he had a good life." Unseen by Louis, he fingered the small bottle at the side of the fool. He had been so sad of late. If this was his choice, then so be it.

"Papa!" The boy turned tear-stained cheeks upwards at his father. "Those groans in the night—would they be his? I was woken by them and thought it was drunken men outside, but could see nothing when I looked out."

His father, who had heard the noises too, said nothing for a moment, watching the dead fool sadly.

"Was it him, Papa? The mute fool? Crying in death?"

The man ruffled his son's hair. "We must prepare him, Louis. Maybe he did speak at last. Who knows? But he is no longer mute. Nor a fool. In death, everything is stripped away. Now, he might find a voice."

"It was screams I heard last night," Louis insisted.

"A new voice needs training," his father said gently. "And perhaps now he will learn to sing." Deftly, he pocketed the empty bottle and took his weeping son from the room. And left the man at peace.

"RELAX – THIS ISN'T A HOLDUP. IT'S JUST MY OWN PERSONAL STATEMENT."

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Art by Allen Davis

The Key Boy

by J. W. Whitehead

I was a key boy in the house of Don Manuel Xavier Fernandez, a great and powerful man of our city, a man to make my mother and father proud, God rest their souls. The house of Don Manuel Fernandez was once the home of the man who founded the Mercer's line of department stores. Now, as everyone in the neighborhood knew, this was history, nothing more. This was the house of Don Manuel Fernandez. Mercer's had sold out to some higher bidder, and the man who'd lived in this house was long since dead of old age.

Don Fernandez had lived in the house half a dozen years when I came to him. Or rather, I was brought to him, in early spring, newly orphaned, my dear mother and father dead in an apartment fire while I was at school, in Mrs. Espinosa's first-grade class. I was six, a smart boy. I had questions. What was my father, who drove a truck for Don Fernandez's import business, doing at home? Why were my parents, usually such cautious people, so careless with the grease fire that erupted in the kitchen and ignited the kerosene heater we so rarely used? They were innocent questions,

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stupid really, for what could it possibly have mattered if someone had answered them, if someone had said, as an older key boy later did when I asked him these same questions: "Your father came home to your mother in the middle of the day because he wanted to pour her the pork without you in the next room, and he dragged her away from the grease she was cooking with to do it, and he put it to her so fast and so long she didn't even remember the grease until it was cooking them both." How could such an answer, such a plausible answer, also suggested (with much greater delicacy) by Don Fernandez himself, have done me any good?

J. W. Whitehead began writing for *EQMM* in 1987 and though there are long intervals between his submissions, he always returns with a stunning tale. If Mr. Whitehead has a favorite subject, it is the coming-of-age story—in which, as he puts it: "a boy meets the knowledge of good and evil." The following story gives that time-honored tale a new twist. We're not sure when we'll hear from the author again, as he is currently at work on a novel. ¶

I was brought, as I say, directly from the school to Don Fernandez. The woman who brought me smelled of lilies, which made me think of Easter morning in the great, cool sanctuary of San Mateo, the lilies banked around the altar, their fragrance washing over even the familiar, thin smoke of the censers. The smell of Christ's death and rebirth. It was this woman who told me of my parents. "Poor *punta,*" she said, walking swiftly through the chilled, misty streets, a steady drizzle drumming at my forehead. I was often called *punta* in those days, because my head shaped to a point, like an inverted kernel of corn. "Poor *mono.* You are a new bastard," she said, stroking the bowl of my ear like a cowslip between her thumb and forefinger, and clamping and tugging at the same tender spot if my pace wavered. Her hips swung at me and then back away like cars in the amusement rides at the San Mateo carnivals.

I had seen the house of Don Manuel Fernandez before, of course. My father would walk me past and say, "Here is the house where my boss lives," as if this was where he reported for work, not the warehouse by the river. My mother, though I did not recognize it as such at the time, would not speak so expansively. "This is a house of great power," she would say, from across the street, the better to give me a sense of how it dwarfed the other houses—all three-story brownstones in their own right—lined along either side of it. To say his name was unnecessary.

So when the woman who smelled of lilies brought me to the

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house and said, "Isn't it magnificent? Like a palace!" I knew where I was. I wasn't surprised until she began to ascend the steps to the house's giant oaken doors. Her fingers pinched at my ear so that my awed hesitation turned to obedience. "Don Fernandez will decide what is to become of you," she said. "He is a great man. He will know. Once, he was like you, no parents, no future, no past. And he has become a Don because of his greatness."

She paused then, at the door, before ringing. She wet the fingers of her right hand on her thick pink tongue and pressed my hair down firmer on my forehead, across my pointed skull.

"Poor *punta,*" she said again. "Your head is wet enough from the rain. Don Fernandez will find a roof for that tiny *punta* head of yours."

A boy opened the door. He was taller than me, older, in fine clothes, neatly pressed. His hair was sleek, combed away from his forehead.

The woman who smelled of lilies released my ear. "This is the boy," she said. "I was asked to bring him to the Don."

The boy at the door gravely handed her an envelope with no writing on it. "The Don expresses his appreciation," he said, as if it were a speech he'd learned to recite for school.

The woman took the envelope and lingered for a moment. I somehow understood that in taking the envelope, her hands would now be too full to clasp my ear again.

"God keep you, *punta,*" she said, and descended the steps into the rain, which had picked up so that she unfolded a black rain bonnet from her handbag and covered her head.

The boy brought me inside a great room—a reception hall—with more wood in it than a forest. It was dark in the house, and somewhere I heard the ticking of clocks—several of them, a patient, powerful sound. A grand staircase stood before us, ascending into the middle of the house and then branching again, left and right, at the top. Everything was dark wood. At the top of the stairs we turned left and ascended a half-flight to a gallery of rooms. There were party lights strung along the balustrade of the gallery, and chairs to sit in, carelessly arranged, as if a party had ended only moments before. The boy took me to the door at the end of this gallery, knocked, and entered, leaving me alone outside. I leaned out over the balustrade, first looking the short way down, then up through a maze of stairs leading up to another three galleries like this one, ending in a skylight of stained glass that glimmered a dull gold and blue in the day's gloom.

Behind me, the door opened. I expected the boy, but when I turned, I saw a man. I knew he was Don Manuel Fernandez. I had seen pictures of him in the newspapers, and my parents pointed him out to me at the San Mateo carnivals, where he held court,

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and at Mass, and if we happened to glimpse him in the street. I waited for him to speak.

He waited at the door. He wasn't tall. His dark hair was combed back on his head and looked wet. His eyes were the darkest thing in the whole dark house, and yet I could see them clearly. He was waiting for me, his eyes said, and I understood them instantly. I came to him with my head bowed, knowing that he would show me with his eyes what I must do. His hand reached out, palm down, and on his pinkie was a ring of enormous size, a red stone like fire. He held it there for me. His eyes bore down his bidding to me, and I pressed the stone to my lips. I could see the boy behind him, already moving, so that as my kiss was ended, he was taking my arm and Don Fernandez was disappearing again inside this door, this chamber of his house. The afterimage of his black eyes gleaming their approval still burned, like the gem in his ring, in the empty air.

For the next week I never left the house of Don Manuel Fernandez, and not once did I see him. I was given a bed, table, and chair in a tidy room with a view out across an alley and rooftops to a shopping plaza several blocks away. My dear mother had walked with me to this plaza for groceries. There was a picture on the wall—three pictures, really, but inside a single frame. The first and last pictures were narrow, the middle one large. The first was of Adam and Eve in the garden. The middle one and the other narrow one—the dark one, with fire rippling through buildings in the distance—had so many people in them that I couldn't tell for sure what story they told.

My roommates were two other boys, key boys in the Don's house, one seven, the other six, like me. We were the youngest, and I was the baby. At night I wept for my mother, and the other six-year-old, whose name was Antonio, would come into my bed and sleep beside me. He was not as small as me, and his face was very dark and beautiful, not like mine—my pointed head, my sallow skin. Sometimes we would cry together. He, too, like most of the boys, had lost his parents, and Don Fernandez in his great compassion had taken him in.

We ate our meals in a large room with a dozen other key boys, all of them older than us, some as much as fourteen or fifteen. The other boy in our room complained of our crying, our sleeping together for comfort, and got to move to a new room with a nine-year-old and a ten-year-old. Then, suddenly, he was like the other boys, indulging us, putting a hand on my shoulder or Antonio's, telling us that it would become easier. I wanted to know what would become easier. But I was so grateful that they indulged us that I never asked, not wanting to anger them by appearing stupid.

There was a man, Señor Javier, who worked with us during the

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day, each age group at a different time. He was teaching us to read, to do sums. Everything in Spanish, no English. The man spoke not a word to us of English. And there was an old woman, too, called Señora Ramirez, who came to us at a different time than the male teacher each day. She was careful not to touch us, as if she were afraid that, once touched, we would never be apart from her again. It was her duty to make sure we bathed properly, spoke politely, kept our rooms neat, and carried ourselves as young *caballeros,* gentlemen fit to represent the house of Don Manuel Xavier Fernandez.

On the occasion of my first week in the house of the Don, Señora Ramirez came to me bearing a white shirt and black pants. She held them as if she'd forgotten them, and she sat down in the chair next to my bed and said to me, "You are still crying at night, still making poor Antonio come to sleep with you in this bed. But you are in the Don's house. You wish to stay." She said this as if we'd talked about it before, though I'd said nothing of the sort to anyone. It hadn't even occurred to me to think that there might be some other place for me than here with Antonio in this room, now that my parents were dead.

"But," she went on, "there is no place here for *mozos* who will not become young *caballeros.* You must be brave and thank God for the Don, who has taken you in in your calamity. And you must continue to be brave if you wish to stay here and become a key boy in the house of the Don. You will see him later today, so wear these." Now she handed me the white shirt, the creases stiletto-sharp from starch and pressing. Draped over her arm like a serving towel were the sharkskin slacks, brilliantly black like the Don's eyes, which I still remembered as if I saw them every night, which in fact I did, in my dreams.

"Gracias, Señora Ramirez," I said.

"Remember this," she said. "The answer to every question but one that he asks you today is yes. The answer to the other is no."

Should I have asked her which one that was? I never thought to. I was already pulling the rough material of the shirt—the sort of shirt I'd seen the other key boys wear when they went about the main floor of the house—onto my skinny torso, fumbling at the pearl buttons at the wrists.

I learned nothing in my lessons that day, answering that two and four made five, seven, eight, even three, but not six. My mind wasn't in it. I was answering yes. Yes, Don Fernandez, I will wear your stiff, scratchy shirts and pants. Yes, Don Fernandez, I will learn to be neat and clean and polite. I will learn to read and write and do sums, only not today, because I can think only of you today, Don Fernandez. Yes, Don Fernandez, I will be a key boy in your house. Yes, I will kiss your ring. I will

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thank God for you. I will be a gentleman, a *caballero.*

I could not think of a no, or I could not think of one to which I could truthfully answer: No, Don Fernandez, I will never miss them again. I will never hold Antonio in the middle of the night. I will never have bad dreams—my parents' hair turned to flames—and awake, whimpering like a beaten puppy. I settled on: No, Don Fernandez, I will never wish for other than what you have given me; and I wondered if this would do.

I expected to be brought to him, and so I was surprised when, immediately after the day's lessons, Señor Javier asked Antonio to come with him and left me to finish reading in my primer a story about a small horse—a pony, really—who goes astray and must outsmart a sly, cruel wolf. Before I could finish, however, there was a knock at the door. Following the instructions of Señora Ramirez for receiving guests, I stood, placed my feet together, and folded my hands before me. "You may enter," I called.

In walked Don Manuel Fernandez. He was unattended. "Sit down," he said.

I wanted to sit immediately, but the closest place to hand was the bed. Señora Ramirez had said that we must sit in chairs and slouch in beds and never confuse the two, so I walked to the nearest chair and sat.

He said nothing, only watched with his glittering black eyes. My hands, folded together on my lap, crawled with slow sweat. My feet dangled several inches above the floor.

Don Fernandez wore a silver suit that gleamed like armor in the afternoon light. There was a patch of light on his right shoulder that glowed. "You are a smart boy," he said. "You study me. 'Who is this man who has taken me in?' You think about things. Your friend Antonio"—he gestured to the other chair, the other bed—"is a handsome boy, but not thoughtful."

For the first time, perhaps because of his comment on Antonio's appearance, it occurred to me that Don Fernandez was ugly. Well-groomed and shining, but a trial to the eye. His black eyes, while striking, were buried too deeply beneath a wide, hairy brow. His nose was pugged, slightly upturned and swollen. His chin and jowls were too large. There were lines in his face, and his face where he shaved was gray with coarse nubs.

"Do you like this house?" he said. "Your room, the boys who live here?"

And my answer, swiftly, confidently, was yes.

"Yes, who?" he said, not unkindly.

"Yes, Don Fernandez."

He studied the view out the window as if he'd never noticed there was a neighborhood beyond the house. He studied my primer, picked it up, and flipped through the pages. He studied the strange

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picture—the three pictures in one—as if he were in another man's house, coming upon a picture he'd never seen before.

"This picture," he said.

I looked at the picture. From a distance I saw no details, only a dramatic darkening from left to right. But I knew what the details were. They had begun to creep like insects into my dreams.

"This is a disturbing picture," he said. "If this picture disturbs you, don't look at it."

"Yes, Don Fernandez," I said.

"But you know what I find?" he said. "I find that this picture only disturbs *mozos* who are not prepared to become men."

Now he sat down, in Antonio's chair, which he turned so it faced mine head-on.

"I am sorry for your loss," he said.

I must have looked at him with confusion, for he said to me, "Your parents. Their death. They must have been still very much in love to be together and not feel the heat of the flames drawing closer."

I said, "Yes, Don Fernandez."

"Your father worked for me," he said. "Did you know that? Of course you did. You are a smart boy. I entrusted in him a portion—however small—of what makes me Don Manuel Xavier Fernandez."

I nodded.

"This can be a heavy burden to bear," he said.

"Yes, Don Fernandez."

"Did your parents ever speak of me, then?"

"Yes, Don Fernandez."

"What did they say?"

"My father said you were a great man and that you were his boss."

"Is that all he said?"

"And he showed me your house. This house."

"And your mother?"

"She spoke of your power."

"My power."

"Yes, Don Fernandez."

"This is all?"

"Yes, Don Fernandez, but they said these things to me many times, not only once."

"No problem," he said, in English. He smiled. "You also speak English?"

I said that I did.

"Bueno," he said. "But we do not speak it here."

I nodded.

"You understand about the boys who live here? They are boys like yourself, without families, endangered. Do you go to church, little *punta?"*

"Yes, Don Fernandez."

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"You know the story of the lost lamb?"

I waited, and he rewarded my hesitation by going on (it struck me that this was not the one question to which I must answer no): "A shepherd," he said, "risks all he has to find the lost sheep. I am that shepherd, capturing up the lambs endangered by my enemies."

He regarded me with eyes of ink. I felt them leaving stains as they watched me, felt the stains soak through my pulpy flesh.

"You are a smart boy," he said. "You know that I have enemies."

Again I waited: I had never thought of enemies except as bad people, the people my mother warned me not to go with on the street, who might ask me to eat something I didn't recognize, or open their pants, or open my own pants, or take a ride with them in their cars.

"My enemies," said Don Fernandez, "seek to destroy me by becoming me. As if they could become me simply by wishing it, or pretending. I was like you, like all the endangered boys I've brought into this house. Alone. But always Manuel Xavier Fernandez. For me it was a matter of time, nothing more. For you, a matter of trusting me to care for you as a good shepherd. I ask only this: that if you live with me, you live *for* me."

Now he fell silent and fixed me with his eyes, and I saw that I must answer: "Yes, Don Fernandez."

"You will be a key boy in my house?"

"Yes, Don Fernandez."

"And will you betray me?"

"No, Don Fernandez."

I knew I had successfully completed our interview. Without any gesture from him, I stood and, head bowed, stooped to kiss the red stone of his ring.

And so I became a key boy and learned the mechanics of the house and grew to think of my parents as a dear, departed chapter in a primer I'd progressed beyond. After that first week I went out into the neighborhood regularly, to the park to play soccer, to the grocery store to practice making change with the merchants, to the library to borrow books and write reports for Señor Javier, to San Mateo early Sunday and Wednesday mornings for Mass. Antonio remained my best friend, but all the boys were kind to me, perhaps because I was the smallest, perhaps because I was the ugliest.

There were always people in the house that first year, which meant that the key boys were very busy. At first I was assigned to Jorge, who pronounced his name "George," a fifteen-year-old key boy who'd lived in the house of Don Fernandez since the Don had moved here. Jorge's mother and older brother had been killed in a drive-by shooting. Jorge was the biggest of the key boys, and the others sarcastically took to calling us the twins. He maintained an almost constant silence, gripping his keys tightly in his fist so

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they made no sound as he walked. He pumped iron in the morning with the strong men who traveled with Don Fernandez and attended his parties to see that everyone behaved. I had heard stories that other key boys had grown up to take their place at Don Fernandez's side. This was what Jorge wanted. He showed me the proper procedure for opening doors, always receiving clearance from Don Fernandez himself or one of his cloud of protectors. He showed me which keys opened which doors, and which doors were no concern of ours. A minimum of conversation passed between us. Yet Jorge, too, felt an affection for me. He would let me do chin-ups on his outstretched arm. He nestled his palm around my pointy skull as if nursing an egg towards hatching.

At the Don's parties, the dark house blazed with light. There were party lights—delicate pinks and blues and greens and violets—strung along the balustrades of the galleries, and these twinkled like trapped fireflies in the dusky glow of the wall lanterns. The wood, polished earlier in the day by key boys released early from their lessons, shone with reflected light. Don Fernandez strolled from floor to floor, his ring extended to receive the tribute of his guests, and with him walked the strong men who lived in the house with us, and visitors hoping for a word with the Don, and women.

These were the only times I saw women—other than Señora Ramirez—within these walls. The women were young, beautiful, full of light. They touched everything. They touched even the key boys, stroked our soft, stubble-free cheeks, raked long, painted nails slowly through our hair, petted our narrow bottoms, and laughed their brilliant, lilting laughter. They quickly adopted the familiar nickname for me. I was their little *punta.* They were the brightest of all the party lights, and the scent of their perfume made my head ache, dizzy with pleasure.

Other times, the guests would assemble as a smaller party, usually men, ushered curtly into this or that chamber, the doors quickly shut, the silence of the rest of the house enlarged. This was the Don's business and not ours. This we understood.

The night the police came to the door, Jorge and I were the key boys. The men who entered were, with one exception, men I did not recognize. The one exception was the man we knew as Nolte, a policeman who wore regular clothes to work and whom Don Fernandez considered a friend. Nolte had been a guest of the Don at the gallery parties before. He knew Spanish, and spoke it with love. He had kissed the red stone.

Now he came into the house demanding to see Don Fernandez. The two men standing with him identified themselves as detectives with the Central Bureau. They seemed not so much to be Nolte's friends or colleagues as to be interested in him, as one

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might watch an actor in a movie or an animal in a cage. "Jorge," said Nolte, "let the Don know we're here so we can clear up this little misunderstanding." And he nodded at the other two men.

Jorge left us in the entry hall, amid the wood and darkness. Nolte wandered, sucking in his cheeks against his teeth. I waited. Nolte, who typically lavished me with attention to curry favor with the women at Don Fernandez's gallery parties, refused to acknowledge my presence. He spoke to the two men in English, perhaps thinking I would not understand: "This guy's through jerking me around, friends. We're through, is what I'm saying. No more of it. *No más,* as *they'd* put it." And he jerked a thumb at me.

Jorge came back and spoke to the men in English. "Don Manuel Xavier Fernandez says to the two men from Central: He will await your warrant. To the lieutenant he says: Go back to screwing Mrs. Nolte."

Nolte looked surprised, and his face reddened. "That ugly bastard knows I'm not married," he said.

One of the men from Central, already leaving, said, "A little slow on the uptake, Nolte. He was talking about your mother."

The Central warrant came the next day, and the Don left for a few hours, and when he returned, his face was bloodied, bruised, and his eyes were blackened so that the pits of the irises were like the bull's-eyes of twin targets that some enemy had hit, repeatedly.

He saw me, read my look of extravagant confusion. He'd left in the company of police, not enemies. "This is nothing. An insult, nothing more."

That night, from up in my room, I heard shouting. The key boys crept from their rooms to peer down through the gallery gloom to the main floor.

Four of the Don's men were carrying another man. Nolte. Each of them had a limb. Nolte was struggling, but he paused a moment. He'd spied one of us through the balustrades, his eyes sharp with panic in the gloom.

"You up there. *Punta!*"

He'd seen me. I pulled back from the rail. We all did, except Jorge, who gazed down in studious concentration.

"Punta!" I heard Nolte yell again. "Help me! Mother of God, don't let them do me like they did—"

And then, after a single shriek, his voice shifted to helpless wailing, and there was a moment of struggle again before the door to the basement closed.

There were fewer gallery parties after that. The key boys went out of the house and back a lot less frequently. The weather turned cold, my second winter since the spring my parents died. In spring, I would begin my third year in the house of Don Manuel Fernandez.

Since the night of Nolte's last visit, the house had coiled itself

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like a threatened snake. The key boys all traveled in pairs, in case one must be dispatched for help. The house, I see now, was in a state of readiness, a state of siege. Police had sniffed around the house since Nolte's last night, and Don Fernandez had received them—even the two men from Central who had beaten him—with calm assurances, and with no suggestion that he was anything but delighted that Nolte had disappeared. "I suspect a man like this offers no shortage of motives," I heard him say to one of them.

I was alarmed at the gentleness, the quiet on both sides. I remembered the sounds Nolte had made that night, the battering of Don Fernandez's face the night the warrant was served. In bed and trying to sleep, I still had bad dreams. My dreams now were almost exclusively of the three pictures on the wall. The naked couple in the garden in the left picture had transformed into my parents, and they became very small so that they might wander through the crowded landscape of the second picture. In the third picture, they burned in the distant buildings while I hung—gray and inert, asleep or dead—inside the loop end of a skeleton key. I remembered what the Don said, however, that the pictures only disturbed *mozos* who were not prepared to become men. So only rarely did I still come to Antonio and, though I wouldn't ask to share his bed, I would plead with him to tell me all would be well.

Beautiful, stupid Antonio would do his best to convince me of the Don's power and wisdom, and God help me, I could not believe him. I loved Antonio, but I hated his casual assurance. I felt the panic of a broken promise, as if already I had betrayed my Don, my master. And I could not help myself. I had seen the imperfection of his rage, and of his enemies' rage. I had no faith in the triumph of either one. I could barely distinguish them. I was left only with the hope that the house of Don Fernandez would not fall in cold weather, when I had nowhere else to go. In such a circumstance, I would be utterly lost.

In this, too, I was powerless. The night on which the house of Don Fernandez was overtaken by his enemies, the Don summoned us all to his private apartment. The Don's rooms were as beautiful as I might have expected, with half-familiar paintings on the walls, soft light, solid furniture, oriental rugs, and dark wood everywhere, shining like mirrors. All of us were gathered: Señor Javier, Señora Ramirez, the key boys, the strong men, even the kitchen help who did not live with us. Perhaps the Don had received some tip, or the wind had carried a rumor to him, so certain he could not ignore it. I had never been inside these rooms of the house, and to be there now, in my state of apostasy, terrified me. I was an ugly boy, the *punta,* but I was smart. I knew that if the Don were to ask me the wrong question, I would

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betray him aloud and be banished from his house.

"I am leaving you," he said to us. "Not forever, but for a time. You are my good friends"—he raised a hand to his strong men—"my dear ones"—and here he nodded to us, his key boys, the images, as he liked to say, of his younger self. "You are my family."

He pointed to each of us, naming us one by one and telling us the future he foresaw for us, like Adam in the Bible, naming animals for the first time and giving them meaning, a purpose. For Antonio, he saw many women—we all laughed appreciatively, a little too loudly—and perhaps a career on the stage. For me, college. "You are my smartest boy, *punta,*" he said. And then he studied me, as he'd done that first gloomy afternoon in the deserted gallery, my parents burned to death that same day, and I like a scrap of paper blown past gutters to his door. "So, *punta,* my smart boy. Has luck at last forsaken me, am I to expect worse before we're through?"

Not a simple yes or no question like at that first interview. The Don expected that I should have grown in wisdom and knowledge in my years within his walls. And so I had. I said the wisest thing I could think of: "Don Fernandez, you are Manuel Xavier Fernandez, now and forever."

The room was silent but for the clocks. Always there were the clocks, patiently ticking away the spell of Don Fernandez's reign.

To my answer, he laughed. For one moment he forgot himself, his closed-off, mysterious dignity, and he threw back his head to laugh.

The sight of his exposed neck may have been more terrifying to me than anything I had to that point witnessed, even Nolte held at quarters and calling my name as if he had some last, dying secret to impart.

We laughed with the Don then in the private rooms we'd always been forbidden from entering, and in that moment, surely even Antonio must have known that the house, despite the solidity of wood and dark and brotherhood, was crumbling.

As it happened, the Don left the house but did not clear the neighborhood. He was stopped about a mile below the bridge that led to the next borough. I don't know what his plans were when he crossed the bridge; probably they would have found him one way or the other. They brought him back. They had already seized the house in a brief, shattering gust of automatic weapons fire. Several of the strong men lay dead in the hall; others had fallen in the galleries, Jorge among them.

I was in the kitchen when the attack was mounted. A fat cop burst through the kitchen door as the windows above the sink and overlooking the back lot collapsed inward in gunfire. Antonio was with me, and one of the cooks. The fat cop wore a blue jacket, so thick I knew it must have a flak vest beneath. Cook lay facedown on the

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floor. In English he yelled, "I have no weapon. I cook. Only cook."

"Uh-uh," said the cop. "Sorry, José. No offense, but you worked for the wrong guy. Your presence is requested in the basement."

Antonio was whimpering. I couldn't understand what they could want with Cook, but while I was a smart boy, there was still much for me to learn.

The fat cop called loudly for assistance, his gun trained on Cook's head, and another man, this one in uniform, came into the kitchen and led Cook, who was still trying to explain his position in the household, away.

The fat cop turned to Antonio and me. Our half-eaten fried bananas sat in cold puddles of grease on our plates. "Why's your buddy crying?" said the fat cop to me. His breath was thick with whiskey. "Doesn't he know we're your ticket out of this butthole?"

God help me, I was dry-eyed. I even remember thinking that there would have been a kind of satisfaction in saying to Antonio, "You *see?* Couldn't you have believed *me?"*

The fat cop said, "You're a cold little son of a bitch, aren't you? I know which one you are. You're the one Nolte called the *punta.* What is that in English? Pinhead?"

I said nothing.

"Come on," said the fat cop. "You can show me around."

We stepped into the once-grand entryway. Antonio trailed behind us, whimpering. The sounds of wrenching and splintering wood were everywhere around us, above our heads in the galleries. It was so loud, so constant, that one could almost imagine no noises were coming from the basement.

"He hid stuff here; Nolte told us that much. Where? You have any idea?"

I looked at him blankly.

"Oh no," the fat cop said, "don't let me rat on my good master Don Fernandez. Don't let me know a thing."

He waved his gun at the staircase. He'd never pointed it at me, but neither did he holster it. "Show me where the master lived. I've got to see some people."

There were men there already, and whole walls torn away. A wall safe had been breached with a small explosive charge that had left a flower of scorched dust on the exposed wall studs. There was money stacked high on a table, and bricks of gold nestled between two floor braces. The fat cop talked quietly with the man who was counting the money. He talked quietly to the other men. He held his gun absently as he talked, the way another man might hold a cigar, a pen, or a fork. Then he returned to Antonio and me. "Okay," he said. "We've had our fun. Where's the dope?"

I truly had no idea and said so.

"You're the key boys," he said. He went to Antonio. He was care-

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ful not to touch us. He stood over Antonio the way a man stands over a urinal. The gun casually pointed at Antonio's head. "You going to tell me, sweetheart?"

Antonio shrieked that he knew nothing about any dope.

The fat cop raised his gun as if to strike with it, then it returned to his side slowly. "You live in this house," he said, "you do the man's laundry, clean his floors, and you don't know the man runs more drugs through here than Rite-Aid? How smart *are* you boys?" He pointed the gun at me. "What are you looking at?" he said. "You're looking at me like I'm the bad guy. You think it's simple, right? One guy's good, the other guy's bad. A guy takes you in, gives you fancy clothes and a pack of keys, you think this must be the good guy. He found you, took you in when you were out on the street. Come on," he said, and he waved the gun at the door. "Tell your friend to go to his room and stay there."

I told Antonio to do as the man said.

"Now you come with me," said the fat cop, and he went out the door first. Someone had turned on all the gallery lights, the sweet twinklers, the glowing lanterns. The house, so torn up, appeared to be on fire, though it was cold, wintry air pouring through forced doors and shattered windows.

"Down the stairs," said the fat cop. We walked down side by side. His breathing was heavy—it sounded not so much like exertion as excitement. It frightened me, and I stopped, a few risers up from the main floor.

"Come on," he said. "You're tough. You can take it. We're going to talk to the Don."

He opened the door to the basement. Floodlights blazed up at us, and a smell of smoke, and a sweat-smell like in a weight room, and the smell of whiskey. Rhythmic pounding noises came up at us, too, like Cook kneading dough, only somehow too large, too loud. The texture of the noise was just unfamiliar enough to be terrifying. And above this noise and the scrape of feet on subflooring and the rending of walls and floors and beams rose the high keen of men in agony. We stepped down into the well of the staircase, and the fat cop closed the door behind us, as if to seal off the rest of the house from some grim germ of disease. "Welcome to hell," he said. "Learn what you can, kid. Put some warm blood in your veins."

The floodlights were police property, battery-powered, stationed here and there on the floor. They threw grotesque, moving shadows across the tops of the walls, around the ceiling. Cook's body was near the base of the steps. The body was missing two limbs—the right arm, the right leg. Blood had ponded under him on one side. On the other, it ran in a thin line to a storm drain. Cook looked quiet. So did Señor Javier and Señora Ramirez, who were propped in the far corner facing the steps. Each of them had a neat black

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hole in the center of the forehead, like a birthmark, or an Indian jewel. There were half-empty whiskey bottles here and there, and occasionally a cop would tip one up to his mouth. We walked past the Don's strong men, some of whom were still alive and weeping for their mothers, for the Virgin, for God to let them die.

"You notice they're not calling for the Don," said the fat cop.

We had not yet reached the source of that strange pounding noise, but as we rounded the corner, suddenly we were upon it. The Don had been stripped naked. His wrists were lashed together above his head with a rope looped around an exposed waste pipe. The red ring was gone from his finger. Two cops, in uniform pants and undershirts, muscles gleaming, were clubbing Don Manuel Xavier Fernandez. One held Cook's leg, the other Cook's arm. Blood and bits of shiny gristle glistened on the walls and in the Don's disheveled hair.

The fat cop said, "Wait a minute. Let me talk to him again."

They put down Cook's limbs and daubed at their faces with linens I recognized from the house's bathrooms, monogrammed with a flourished *F*.

"Your *men,*" the fat cop said to the Don, "were happy to tell us where enough dope is to keep the store up and running for another six months or so. By then all your buddies down in Honduras or whatever butthole you come from will be lining up to do business. I believe we've about bought you out, José. Out there in the *real* business world, this is what they'd call a hostile takeover."

The Don opened his eyes and tried to raise his head, but he hadn't the strength. This is when he saw me. He, too, had yet to shed a tear. *"Punta,"* he said. "Say you do not know me. You know nothing of me."

The fat cop said, "That's touching, Pepe, it really is, but we don't *want* anything from him. We're going to find the pinhead here a good home. Hopefully, third time's the charm."

"Take him away from here, you fat pig. A boy. What can you gain?"

The fat cop ignored the insult. He took a whiskey bottle from one of the men who'd been clubbing the Don and tipped it back. Then he said to the Don, "Tell him who killed his parents, there, spic-o. Go ahead and straighten him out."

The Don looked at me, and his look told me that I, a smart boy, had known this answer all along. His eyes were no less black, but they had dulled, their brilliance scorched to the driest slate.

"You do not know me," he said. "You never knew me. Walk away, *punta.* Walk away and forget. Become a great man."

"You are Manuel Xavier Fernandez," I said.

"Not for long," said the fat cop, and he snorted like a bull at his own joke.

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"Now and forever," I said, and I threw my ring of keys at the Don's ugly face, and I spit at his blackened chest.

I kept spitting as I went up the steps, the way one will spit upon tasting turned milk, hoping not to be surprised later by some last putrid drop, undetected under the tongue or at the back of the throat. I spit at Antonio when he came rushing to hold me, the strong one now. *Walk away and forget*, the Don had said to me, near death and wishing to be delivered. I only wish I could have broken my promise and betrayed him again, over and over. Perhaps this is why I tell my story: to continue betraying him. *Walk away and forget.* I hated him most for saying this, knowing full well that my remembering had only just begun. ●

BY DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT

Nolen Harsh

Here comes the golden orb of sun,
Its light is warm and bright.
The darkness must before it run,
A creature of the night.

I look below. Down there's the street,
Excited people there.
They laugh and jeer and point at me,
So high up in the air.

We have a bank in this fair town.
It has a lovely roof.
Don't fix me with your scornful frown.
I know. I made a goof!

The climb was hard. The roof was steep.
The hole I cut just so.
I never made a sound or peep,
To give away my show.

Then fickle fate it took a hand
And gave me such a blow.
Just stomped right on my careful plan
And laid my fortunes low.

The hole I'd cut, alas, too small.
I guess I'm just a schmuck.
I can't climb out. Can't even fall.
Such lousy luck—I'm stuck!

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Guardians of the Night

by Donald Olson

More than half the stories in this rather hardboiled issue feature cops: seasoned, zealous, tired, and even corrupt cops. The mix wouldn't be complete without a rookie, and we find him, fresh-faced and eager, in Donald Olson's "Guardians of the Night"—an epithet Mr. Olson employs to describe all those men in blue. ‡

It was midnight in a suburb where neighbors minded their own business, where criminal activity seldom disturbed their sleep. Cradling the mushroom-colored cat in one arm, the woman nipped the moonlit head of a withered geranium and tossed it into the shadows below the fluted column of the porch. Moments later a police cruiser turned into the drive from Rowley Court. The woman climbed the steps to stand before the fanlighted door like a hostess beaming upon the arrival of her first guest.

Snub-nosed and freckly, he seemed to her impossibly young for a policeman, more like one of those teenagers who whizzed past her in fast cars looking as if they should still be riding bicycles.

"Mrs. Newbridge?"

"Bless you, my dear, for being so prompt." She proceeded to explain in a dithery way about the keys, how she must have dropped them when paying the taxi driver, had searched the road and the drive and in the grass, but no luck. "I phoned you from the call box rather than disturb my neighbor. No, no, Mitka! Don't do that." She gripped the offending paw and waggled it in the policeman's face. "Say good evening to nice Officer . . . ?"

"Tom Allen, ma'am."

He looked uncertainly at the cat and then at the house.

"Windows and other doors securely locked?"

"Oh yes. One has to be so careful nowadays. I thought you might have one of those handy gadgets burglars use to pick locks."

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"Afraid not," he said with a grin.

"'Round the side there," she pointed, "French doors open onto an upstairs porch. It might be best to break one of those small panes, if we must, and unlatch the door. There's a ladder alongside the garage, if you don't mind climbing. A foolish place to leave it, I know."

"No problem."

Once inside the house, she thanked the officer as lavishly as if he'd rescued her from a burning building and tweaked a couple of cat hairs from the sleeve of her mauve silk dress. Her own hair was the color of cobwebs and just as fine; except for blue eyes and no whiskers, her small-featured face looked rather like the cat's.

Once more the hostess, she asked if she could offer him something. Tea? Coffee?

"Thanks all the same, ma'am." He looked around and said, "Lovely home. All these antiques."

"Some would say it looks like a funeral parlor. Mr. Newbridge's taste, not mine. Gone to his reward, poor man."

"I like antiques. So does my wife. Too pricey for us, though."

She followed him out onto the porch with more words of gratitude. "You know how I think of the police? As guardians of the night—like the stars." Several of which were visible among the pale, high-flying clouds.

"Too bad more people don't share your opinion," he said.

"Not everyone has occasion to be grateful."

She watched him drive away, stood for a moment enjoying the stillness of the night, and then went inside and switched on a Tiffany lamp beneath a Victorian watercolor in a heavily carved gilt frame, a misty view of the Grand Canal.

The cat regarded her with an amber-eyed, unwavering gaze which might have betrayed lust or hunger or mere curiosity.

"Nibble-nibble, darling?"

In the gleaming kitchen she found a can of pink salmon, emptied it into a milk-white bowl where it looked so prettily appealing she sampled a few forkfuls before placing it on the floor.

Tom. Perfect name for such a sweet, unassuming young man. She thought of Tom Sawyer and *Tom Brown's School Days*. Dimples, even, in a face that hadn't altogether made the transition from boyhood.

As she rinsed the bowl under the tap, she suddenly froze. What was that noise? She stood very still, listening. Had it come from upstairs?

Don't be stupid, she scolded herself. Couldn't possibly be anyone else in the house. Never a timid soul, even if she'd given that impression to the policeman, she armed herself with a rolling pin and began to explore, first the lower rooms and then,

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stealthily, in her stocking feet, the upper floor.

The tapping noise came again, seemingly from the second room on the left, the door of which was ajar. Gripping her weapon, she pushed the door open and peered in. Moonlight, filtered through lace curtains, illuminated with an eerie radiance the ornate headboard of a polished brass bed. With instant relief she soon discovered what was making the noise. The French door through which Officer Allen had entered the room was unlatched and rattling in the wind. As she moved to shut it she saw the ladder still propped against the porch railing. The nice young man had neglected to remove it. Well, goodness knows, policemen were not perfect. She had no choice but to leave it where it was. Then a faint mewling sound distracted her. The cat had stolen into the room and was now testing the bed with tentative pawing movements. Smiling, she left him curled up on the ivory satin spread.

The adjoining bathroom was a dream. Sea-green tile and gold-plated fixtures, a rainbow array of bath oils and crystals. She had bathed earlier in the day but now decided a leisurely soak in the tub would be just the thing to relax the slight tension produced by her night's adventure.

Later, stretched out upon the bed beside the snoozing cat, she reached for the white princess phone on the marble-topped night-stand.

"Moira, did I wake you? . . . Yes, I know, silly question, but I felt like talking and you know you're the only one I ever talk to. I mean *really* talk. . . . Wrong? No, of course nothing's wrong. I'm snug as a bug, just lying in bed with Mitka . . . The cat, dear . . . Well, I have one now. Found him on the doorstep yesterday. I call him Mitka. I had a cat named Mitka when I was little, remember? Till mean old Daddy made me give him away . . . What? No, I'm not saying Daddy was a brute, but he could be cruel, he could be very unfeeling."

She pressed the phone to her breast, but it was only the sound of the wind in the cottonwood tree. Nothing to be alarmed about.

"I don't want to talk about Daddy. I rang to tell you I may be taking off again. I'm toying with the idea of a cruise . . . *On Golden Pond?* Very droll, dear. Ha ha. But people did tell me I looked a bit like Katharine Hepburn when I was young. I think I still do when I wear my red wig. But doesn't a cruise sound heavenly? . . . Don't be a spoilsport, love, of course I can afford it. Why else do you think I've been building up a nest egg? Everyone should have a nest egg. Add a little to it every chance you get and before you know it—cruise time! Oh dear, Mitka's making funny noises. I think he wants to go out. . . . Night-night, dear."

She opened the back door and watched the cat streak off into the shadows cast by tall spruce trees walling the lawn. Scudding clouds created the illusion of a racing moon. She shivered and went back

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inside, but the cold had invaded her heart. The house oppressed her. It was like being trapped in a mausoleum. As she wandered from room to room, she felt like a tourist in one of those stately homes too chillingly opulent to excite envy in any but the homeless.

A woman alone has no right to live in a house like this, she thought. Not when hordes of lost souls were living in shanties or with not even a roof over their heads. Why, only think how many hungry mouths could be fed for months by those silver candlesticks alone. No, life was frightfully unjust. But what could she do about it? *She* couldn't feed the hungry and house the homeless. She was too selfish, too insecure, too frightened of life; so she thought of herself, at least. And was it any wonder crime was rampant in the world? Could you really blame the have-nots for preying on the haves?

This made her think about the ladder leaning so conveniently against the house. It didn't really worry her. But it did inspire a wildly audacious idea, one she knew it would be unwise to act upon; nor could she comprehend exactly why the sudden desire was so tempting: the wish to see him again, that fresh-faced young policeman who had been so politely, even ardently helpful, as perhaps only an inexperienced rookie could have been.

Yet she felt a peculiar excitement as she picked up the phone and asked if Officer Tom Allen was still on duty. If he wasn't there she would simply hang up. Somewhat to her dismay, for she was already having second thoughts, he came on the line.

"It's me again," she said brightly. "I've just discovered you left the ladder against the porch."

"My gosh, I did, didn't I? I'm very sorry, Mrs. Newbridge. Can't think how I could have forgotten."

"It really doesn't matter. It's just that I'm alone in the house and I thought . . ."

"No problem, ma'am. I'll be right there. We can't have a cat burglar using it for the same purpose I did."

"If you're quite *sure* it's no bother. I do hate to be such a fussbudget."

"Don't apologize. I'll be there soon as I can."

"I'll put the kettle on. Least I can do is offer you a cup of tea." She hung up before he could protest.

She found tea bags and a jar of instant coffee and in the refrigerator a package of frozen croissants. She popped these in the microwave and set the kettle to boil. She decided against mugs and chose a pair of dainty cups and saucers from the china closet. To create a sense of occasion she even lit the candles on the dining room table. The phrase "playing with fire" crossed her mind but she dismissed it with a toss of her head.

She had anticipated the astonishment on the young policeman's

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face and she was not disappointed. He actually blushed with surprise, so deep a blush the freckles on his boyish face faded from sight. She wondered if he thought her a trifle dotty, but so what if he did, she was having fun. When was the last time she'd entertained a young man? No harm, surely.

"Tea or coffee?" she asked.

"Coffee, please. You really shouldn't do this, you know."

"Why not?"

"I'm only doing my job."

"I know. Guardians of the night—like the stars." Even without the red wig she imagined herself looking like Katharine Hepburn, stupefying a naive young admirer by the force of her charm. "Frankly, I'm glad you forgot about the ladder. I was feeling edgy for quite another reason, which I needn't explain." Katharine Hepburn with a hint of mystery.

He accepted a croissant. "You live all by yourself in this big house?"

"I'm here alone now. Foolish, isn't it? Some nights I get so lonely I can't stand it. Sometimes I just run off to a friend's for company. Maybe I'll do that tonight. But tell me about yourself. You're married, I think you said."

"Six months now. My wife's expecting our first child in November."

"Congratulations!"

"We hadn't planned on starting a family so soon, though. I don't make much money, being new on the force." As if she couldn't tell. "And Penny had to quit her job at Big Lots."

"Maybe you have a little nest egg?" she inquired.

"We don't even have our own nest. We're still living with Penny's folks."

"Never mind. I'm sure you'll get a promotion soon."

"Or be back reading meters. Tonight's not the first dumb thing I did."

Beneath the shy smile and lighthearted mockery she discerned a core of genuine self-doubt. She asked if he'd always wanted to be a policeman. He shook his head. "Not really. It just seemed the way to go. Not even sure I've got what it takes. Some of the stuff we run into, it's pretty grim. And dangerous."

"I'm sure it is," she said. "But you do *like* being a policeman."

"Most of the time. I just do my job and hope I don't screw up."

"I'm sure you do it conscientiously," she said, with a verbal pat on the back. "You've made *me* feel much better. Even so, I think I'll pack a few things and go to my friend's. For the weekend, maybe."

He carefully folded his napkin and stood up. "Say, this has been great, Mrs. Newbridge. Now I better put that ladder back and get back to the station."

Another sudden impulse. "Wait. I want to give you something. It

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might take a bit of searching. Be right back."

She was gone several minutes and when she returned she handed him a small leather case. "Look inside. See if you like it."

He could not have shown more surprise if he'd been a child expecting a candy bar and been given a handful of gold nuggets.

"It's a man's watch, so it's no good to me," she said.

"But a Rolex! They're super expensive."

"I want you to have it."

She relished his look of utter dismay. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. I'm not suggesting you wear it on the job. One can imagine what your fellow officers would say. No, it must be our little secret. Put it away, like money in the bank. A nest egg. Everyone should have a nest egg."

His look of innocent confusion was almost too painful to observe. He must have been trained, she thought, in how to deal with attempts at bribery but was clearly uncertain how to respond to unexpected acts of simple generosity.

"It wouldn't be right, Mrs. Newbridge. Awfully kind, but gosh, you don't even know me. It would—I don't think it would be ethical. Know what I mean?"

"Nonsense, my boy. You've been very kind about my little misadventure. You must allow me a bit of kindness in return. Now not another word about it. You've things to do and so have I. I'll pack a few things and ring for a taxi to take me to my friend's, late as it is."

When he was gone, plainly still wrestling with his conscience, she shut the door behind him and lapsed into a mood of unremorseful sadness. Such a darling boy, and so naive. Much too naive for his own good. Clearly, he was not cut out to be a policeman. She'd no right to put him on the spot like that. But then her mood lightened. After all, what would life be worth without a bit of mischievous fun now and then?

Alone again and lonely, forever outside of life looking in, she climbed the stairs to the bedroom and again picked up the phone; but as before, when she'd lain there beside the sleeping cat, she didn't actually dial a number—or even pretend to, as she'd done as a child when she'd first begun the game of imaginary conversations with herself on a toy phone which had taken the place of companions she'd never had.

"Still awake, Moira? I've just had the loveliest visit with the most adorable young man . . . No, I'm not fibbing. We had tea by candlelight and shared secrets you can only share with a stranger in the dead of night . . . Handsome? Divinely. Except for his uniform, he looked exactly like one of those young Mormon missionaries who come to the door looking like angels in white shirts and ties, so sweetly earnest they make you feel like the blackest of sinners . . .

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He was a cop, you see. He brought a warrant for my release, from the prison of the night. Did Katharine Hepburn say that in some movie? I can't remember. . . . I gave him a little nest egg. Call it a keepsake, a token of appreciation. Call it alms to the innocent."

The term "Revitalization Center," used by the Melbourne Clinic in its ultra-discreet advertisements, might suggest some sort of health and fitness emporium. Actually, it provided plastic and reconstructive surgery, primarily of a cosmetic nature, to those wealthy enough to afford its services, predominantly women of advancing years who consulted Dr. Ignatius Melbourne for the usual reasons: fear of losing a lover or husband, or the simple fear of growing old.

Madeline Resnick, the supervising nurse at the Melbourne Clinic, concealed beneath a facade of brisk efficiency and professional diplomacy an underlying contempt for most of the patients for whose comfort she was responsible. On rare occasions this contempt proved strong enough to overcome her usual reticence. Such was the case on this particular night.

"Bickling," she said to the nurse who had just come on duty and who was leaving at the end of the week to take a job at one of those posh, so-called "fat farms" somewhere in the Southwest, "you'd better look in on Mrs. Newbridge. You seem to be the only one she doesn't reduce to tears with her barbwire tongue."

Nurse Bickling, whose good humor remained unassailable in the face of acute provocation, replied with a hearty laugh. "She *can* be a pain, but she does seem to find me a sympathetic listener. I swear there's not a thing about that woman's life I haven't learned in the past three weeks. But that's my job, isn't it?"

"I'm not without sympathy," said Resnick, "but I find something odious about a woman who's had four husbands, each younger than the one before. Another wrinkle or two and she's off on a 'cruise.' Or so she tells everyone before she checks in here."

"A cruise to the Fountain of Youth," replied Bickling with wry amusement. The follies of the rich didn't disgust her. Without them, where would *she* be?

Nurse Bickling found the patient in question enthroned by a window in her room, regarding her dinner tray with a frown of distaste, or what appeared to be a frown from what was visible of her features not masked by post-surgical bandaging.

"Ah, Bickling. You're late."

"I had things to do, Mrs. Newbridge."

"I'm sure. Well now, please do me the immense favor of removing this appalling meal and bringing me something halfway edible."

"Isn't it what you ordered?"

"I *ordered* smoked salmon. This tastes like codfish. God, how standards have declined in this place. I shall speak to Dr. Melbourne."

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"Well, dear, you'll feel better about everything once the rest of your bandages are removed."

"Assuming the standards of surgical competence have not also declined. By the way, my dear, that eye shadow you're wearing is quite the wrong shade. Or change the color of your hair."

"It's a wig."

"We *know,*" replied Mrs. Newbridge with heavy sarcasm.

Nurse Bickling picked up the tray and headed for the door.

"And Bickling, I hope you won't fall asleep over one of your tawdry romance novels. If I'm awake all night again I shall expect you to be available if I feel like chatting. I get very agitated when I can't sleep."

Moira Bickling turned and regarded Mrs. Newbridge with a sweetly indulgent smile. "We're all here for you if you need us. Think of us as guardians of the night—like the stars."

The robbery was not discovered until a week later, and young Tom Allen's wife was doing her utmost to allay her husband's anxiety.

"Sweetheart, you can't possibly be held responsible. You had no way of knowing the woman wasn't really Mrs. Newbridge."

Cold comfort that was. "Hell, Penny, she certainly looked bona fide. Standing there cool as a queen, holding the cat and twittering on about what a fool she was to lose her keys. You could say I was an accessory to the crime. My God, I helped her break in."

Only a wife could have seen the humor in the situation. "You must admit it took a lot of gall. How could she have known you wouldn't ask for some identification?"

"That's what I should have done, as the chief kept reminding me."

"And then to call you back."

"And lay on a little tea party. You know, honey, I'm not at all sure I'm cut out to be a cop."

"I won't be sorry if you look for something else. Baby or no baby."

He kept recollecting things the woman had said and done, as if he couldn't stop rubbing salt into the wound of humiliation. "You know, she never actually *lied.* Never *said* she was Mrs. Newbridge. And telling me she was going to pack up a few things and call a cab. Oh, sure. Silver, jewelry, everything she could stuff in a suitcase. Lord knows where she is now."

Penny gave him a quick hug. "Cheer up, Tom. Everything will be all right, whatever you decide to do. We'll get by."

Oh yes, he thought, they'd get by. After all, they had the start of a nest egg. He'd said nothing to anyone about that, not even Penny, for fear she'd reprimand him about accepting the watch.

He could only hope the woman would never be caught, that it would remain, as she'd said, "our little secret."

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BIG SISTER

by Andrew Vachss

When she didn't come on Visiting Day, I knew what it meant. There's only one thing that would make Margaret miss coming to see me.

It's always been like that, my big sister looking out for me. She's only nine years older, but it was like she was my mother. I guess she was, when I think about it. My mother died when I was born. Died giving birth to me, my father always said when he was mad. Or drunk. Which is pretty much how he was all the time.

Like all of Andrew Vachss's work, this story turns on the theme of child abuse. The author's new novel, *Choice of Evil* (5/99-Knopf), is the tenth book in a series he began in order to make a wide audience aware of the problems he encounters in his legal practice for children.

My sister is the only one I can ever remember taking care of me. I mean, my father worked, so I guess he did some of it too. Paying the rent and buying food. But it was Margaret who did everything else.

She even went to the Catholic school when they kicked me out the first time. The nuns were so impressed with her, only fifteen years old and all, they let me stay. But it didn't matter. My father said that's what he expected. He couldn't beat any sense into me, so what made Margaret think the nuns could? Margaret told him that hitting me wasn't the way to teach me anything, and my father hit her. By the time I got the knife from the kitchen, he had stopped, but Margaret was still crying so I tried to stab him anyway.

Everybody came to the house. The police and the social workers and people from the church and neighbors. It was like a zoo. And I was the animal. Finally, they said it was up to my father. He went into the bedroom with Margaret and closed the door so they could talk. When they came out, my father said he wanted me to stay. So I didn't have to go away.

I went to public school. It was a lot better. They didn't pay so much attention to you.

The first time I got arrested, it was Margaret who came to the station. She was all grown by then. The cops let me go back with her.

The first time I went to juvenile court, Margaret went with me too.

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And the judge let me go home with her.

Margaret was good at that stuff.

But when I got to be around thirteen, fourteen, I don't remember exactly, it didn't do any good. I went away. It was only for a short time. But then it happened again, and I went away for longer. When I came back, I was seventeen. Margaret was living with a man. He was an old man. Almost like my father. Margaret told me I could stay with them until I got a job and my own place.

What happened was, I *did* jobs. But Margaret didn't know anything about that. Everything would have been okay, maybe, if that man hadn't hit her. I don't even remember his name.

Margaret went to court with me again. She told the jury how the man had beat her all the time. She said some of the things he made her do. I started crying when I heard it. I couldn't help it.

The jury let me go home with her.

I was out for almost five years before they got me. I wasn't so surprised. I was very good at doing people, but I was never slick.

The cops knew it wasn't personal. They knew I didn't know the men who died. They knew I was in O'Donnell's crew too. But that was all they knew, and I didn't tell them anything. The D.A. said they could give me some deal. I was a young man. I could be out in ten years at the most if I told them who ordered the hits. If I didn't talk, I was going away forever.

I didn't tell them anything. After a while, they could see I was never going to.

Margaret visited me in the jail, before the trial. I told her the truth like I always do. I told her what I did. The different jobs, all of them. I told her I wasn't going to get off. Not this time. But I promised her I would work real hard and try to do good wherever they sent me.

O'Donnell got me a lawyer. He wasn't too bad, but I knew what his real job was. So I told the lawyer to tell O'Donnell I'd never rat him out so long as he did this one thing for me. The lawyer, he said that would never be a problem. O'Donnell's name never came up at the trial. I got life.

The first time Margaret visited me, when I was upstate, she was a mess. She looked so old, I almost didn't recognize her.

She told me about it, finally.

And O'Donnell kept his word.

It didn't happen again for almost three years. Margaret tried to explain it to me. She had been in therapy to understand herself, why she kept going back to the same kind of guys. She told me that she had low self-esteem. From not being pretty and not dating when she was a girl and being too fat and . . . something she had to do with my father to keep him from sending me away. There was nothing I could do about that. He was already dead. His liver.

I told her she was a real pretty girl, and she could get any guy

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she wanted. She told me her youth was gone. She wasn't a girl. She was too old to do anything except work and live with guys who beat her up and took her money now.

O'Donnell got that one done too.

I didn't feel bad about it. He owed me. Anyway, there was a guy in here who was maybe a problem, and I took care of him for O'Donnell. Fair is fair.

Anyway, after a while, Margaret must have figured out what was going on—she knew I could tell when one of those men was hurting her. Margaret never missed a visit, so when she didn't come this time, I knew what the reason was. She was afraid I'd be able to tell.

I knew the name of the guy she was living with, and the place where they lived, too. Margaret wrote me letters. She was the only one who did. So when she didn't come, I didn't need to talk to her. I knew what to do.

Margaret missed three more visits, then she came. She looked better. We didn't say anything about the guy. She told me she was still in therapy, but she was worried that she'd fall back into old habits. Patterns, she called them. Over the next few years, she fell back into that pattern four more times. Then the cops came to see me.

"We know you're the one getting these guys done," the younger one said.

I didn't say anything.

"Ah, Mickey's too smart to go for that," the older cop told his partner. "He knows another few life sentences won't matter—you can only do one of them, and Mickey's never getting out anyway."

I didn't say anything.

"You're working O'Donnell's boys pretty hard," the older one told me. "Must be averaging a hit a year, just keeping you quiet."

I didn't say anything.

"I got something to show you," he said.

I took a look at the papers he had. There were photographs of Margaret. She looked good in the pictures. Young and happy. One of them, she was getting into a new Cadillac. There were bank statements and other stuff too. And a picture of a house. Margaret was standing in front of it, smiling. Her arm was around another woman, a smaller woman, nice-looking, with short hair.

"Your sister's real smart," the older cop said. "You know she's the most reliable hitter in the city now? A contract killer. And the beauty part is, she gets O'Donnell's crew to do all the work."

I didn't say anything. I didn't look at him.

"She hasn't lived with a man in a long time, kid," the older cop said to me. Real soft and gentle. "She's gay, your sister Margaret. Those addresses where she tells you she lives? Those aren't her addresses. They're the addresses of guys who got contracts out on them. That's some big sister you got, Mickey."

"She sure is," I told him. Proud. ●

For Margaret Engelke

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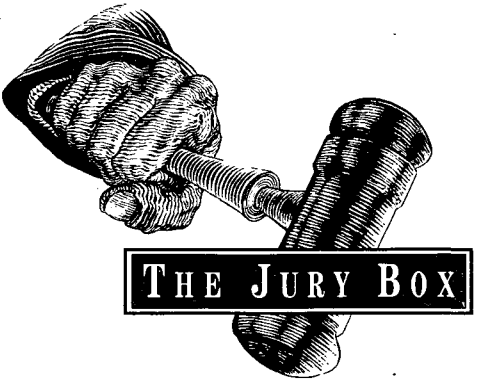

by Jon L. Breen

As a rule, British writers who set mysteries in the United States are men, while American writers who set mysteries in Great Britain are women. Every rule has its exceptions—I can hear some of you shouting the name of John Dickson Carr, for one—but they are few in this case. The reason is easy to see. American crime fiction is usually defined in terms of hard-boiled pioneers Hammett and Chandler and their masculine descendants: Mickey Spillane, Jim Thompson, and (among present-day writers) Elmore Leonard and James Lee Burke. Meanwhile, the British school calls to mind the feminine: Sayers, Christie, Marsh, Allingham, and current icons P.D. James and Ruth Rendell. Thus, tough guys of the Brit-noir school make even their London-based writings as American in tone and feel as they can manage, while American women of the cozy persuasion sometimes replicate English villages.

Recent years have seen two American women, Martha Grimes and Elizabeth George, enjoy bestselling success writing ersatz-English police novels. A third American female writer about British cops, Texan Deborah Crombie, is not yet as famous as the other two but, by virtue of my sampling, is the best writer of the three.

**** Deborah Crombie: *Kissed a Sad Goodbye,* Bantam, $23.95. Duncan Kincaid and Gemma James, Scotland Yard detectives and discreet lovers, return for their sixth case. Their present-day investigation of the mutilation murder of a beautiful woman alternates with flashbacks to the experiences of a child evacuated from London's East End in the early days of World War II. The two story lines eventually dovetail in an admirable denouement. This is a smashing effort right down to the evocative epigraphs about London's docklands. Crombie manages to avoid the main pitfalls of her two better-known

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colleagues: Grimes's tendency to cultural solecisms (say British critics) and George's excessive length and plodding prose.

**** Nancy Pickard: *Storm Warnings,* Five Star, P.O. Box 159, Thorndike, ME 04986; $21.95. Pickard is one of those writers who produces relatively conventional (though outstanding) mysteries at novel length and experiments with a wide range of themes and backgrounds in her few short stories. The nine in this first collection ring some unusual variations on standard suspense situations and characters: domestic betrayal; murder for hire; private eyes; crooks, and con men. Several of the stories have a subtly mystical or paranormal air, while the final tale, "It Had to Be You," crosses over into pure fantasy as the appearance of Marilyn Monroe on Mount Rushmore provides a religious experience for many onlookers. The collection can only enhance Pickard's reputation as one of the best and most inventive current practitioners of crime fiction.

*** K.K. Beck: *The Revenge of Kali-Ra,* Mysterious, $22. When air-headed Hollywood star Nadia Wentworth wants her next picture to be drawn from the works of Valerian Ricardo, a deceased and long out-of-print Sax Rohmer-ish thriller writer whose most famous creation was Kali-Ra, Queen of Doom, a number of interested parties descend on Nadia's Beverly Hills estate: a pretentious pop culture scholar, a mob-connected crooner, the author's weird widow, and a beautiful young Valley Girl who sometimes takes on the Kali-Ra persona. The reliably entertaining Beck has two edges over most mystery-writing humorists: She never seems to be straining for laughs and she keeps her novel to a reasonable length.

*** Catherine Aird: *Stiff News,* St. Martin's, $21.95. Aird is another writer whose novels justify the title of Howard Haycraft's famous detective-fiction history, *Murder for Pleasure.* Detective-Inspector C.D. Sloan and his feckless partner, Constable Crosby, look into a suspicious death at Almstone Manor, a retirement home for survivors and wives of a World War II regiment. There are serious issues at the root of the plot, but Aird's touch is as lightly comic as her plot is deftly cunning.

*** Christopher Darden and Dick Lochte: *The Trials of Nikki Hill,* Warner, $25. O.J. Simpson prosecutor Darden lends his legal expertise to a first-rate mystery-writing pro in this novel about L.A. Deputy D.A. Nicolette Hill, who would be a pleasure to meet again. If you're expecting a *roman à clef,* there are similarities to the Simpson case—prominent African-American defendant (a female movie star in this case), beautiful white victim (a TV personality), media circus, black D.A. on the prosecution team—but the Kato Kaelen, Marcia Clark, Johnny Cochran, and Mark Fuhrman figures come well dis-

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guised. You may guess the murderer, and trial buffs may regret the brevity of the courtroom action, but the telling is bright, the people interesting, and the plotting sure-handed.

*** Pamela Thomas-Graham: *Blue Blood,* Simon & Schuster, $23. The second novel about another African-American heroine called Nikki, Harvard professor Veronica Chase, takes her to New Haven, Connecticut, home of Ivy League rival Yale, when a former classmate and wife of an old friend is murdered. The well-observed academic background commends this series to readers of Amanda Cross, though Thomas-Graham's dialogue is less arch and her perspective, though equally liberal and feminist, allows for more shades of gray between good guys and bad guys. Along with an enthralling whodunit plot, the novel offers a nice sense of Yale, including visits to the tables down at Mory's, the Yale Rep, and the law library where Bill met Hillary. (I'm glad the near-record three pages of acknowledgments preceding the novel didn't cause me to turn back.)

** Virginia Lanier: *Ten Little Bloodhounds,* HarperCollins, $24. Jo Beth Sidden, a bloodhound trainer and tracker of missing persons who is (in the current fashion) accompanied by a large cast of continuing friends and associates, returns for her fifth outing. Fascinating stuff about bloodhounds—their breeding and raising, their personalities and peculiarities, their "expert testimony"—somewhat compensates for the scattershot plotting. Modular mysteries can be effective in the hands of a master, but here the profusion of cases, coupled with the extreme thinness of the principal whodunit, is frustrating. (Amusing irony: The reader who picks the book up saying, "At least this one is about dogs," will find a precious phone-hating pussycat in the very first chapter.)

In a career now spanning more than thirty years, Bill Pronzini has produced mystery fiction, short and long, of a quality and variety matched by few if any of his contemporaries. If I were to pick the top handful of novels from his prolific output, two would probably be *Blue Lonesome* (1995) and the Edgar-nominated *A Wasteland of Strangers* (1997). Both are broodingly atmospheric, masterfully plotted non-series novels; both play out their suspenseful story lines in small towns; and both have been reissued in trade paperback (Walker, $8.95 each).

Another notable reprint is the first hardcover publication of Thomas H. Cook's 1980 Edgar nominee, *Blood Innocents* (Five Star, $20.95). The account of New York cop Reardon's search for a serial killer is somewhat in the mode of Lawrence Sanders's Deadly Sin series. Years before his recent string of original and challenging reflections on time and memory, Cook was already a formidable suspense writer.

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Art by Mark Evans

REDEMPTION

by Tim Hemlin

Thick fog spilled out of the wounded black night. At the first stoplight on Main Street someone bumped the car I was driving. I wouldn't look back, afraid the jolt had popped the trunk open. My eyes fixed on the railroad tracks to my right. Dormant boxcars were wedged like gravestones on an ancient hill. I heard a horn. No way was I going to get out. Then the car pulled around me and screeched off. Sweat as cold as the dead hour's air condensed on my skin.

For a moment it had been as easy as I'd thought it could be. Now everything was shifting too far from normal. I took a deep breath, finally glanced in the rearview mirror. The trunk was still closed. That was when I saw him.

He stepped out of the gray shroud and rapped on the passenger-side window with a key. My first thought was that he was a cop, and I searched for the flashing blues I'd become all too familiar with over the last thirty years. But there was no car behind me or in front of me and he wasn't a cop. He was young and thin, not too tall, wore a black leather jacket and had his blond hair pulled into

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a ponytail. My expression must've been pretty bad because he took a couple of steps back and raised his hands to his chest as if I was holding him up. He made a rolling motion with one hand and pointed at my window.

I found the control switches on my door and eased the window open a couple of inches.

"I broke down," he said.

"Where's your car?"

"About a half a mile up."

"Up?" I forced myself to look him in the eye.

"Could you give me a ride?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"Look, buddy, I'm kind of in a fix."

"You don't want me to give you a ride."

"I can pay you."

The road was as silent as a dead man's mind. The light switched from green to yellow to red to green to yellow. . . .

"Hey, man, you don't look too good," he said.

"Did you see that car hit me?"

"What car?"

I stared at him.

"You going to give me a ride or not?"

Hadn't I already said no? What the hell, he could come along. He'd gotten a good look at me. And I knew he was lying.

"Get in." I hit the unlock button.

"Thanks." He climbed in the passenger's side. I was ready to drive on.

He stuck his hands in his pockets. The fog made for hard going. I thought of Cheryl. She was up north with the kids visiting her brother. I'd made sure to know when she'd be out of town. She was still family, but since Vance had died I didn't see much of her, unless that son of a bitch ex-husband was on the prowl again. He'd haunt her to the grave. Vance had told me that, and now without him to protect her—

"Why do you have gloves on?" the kid asked, breaking me from my thoughts.

"What?"

"You think you're at the races?"

Author Tim Hemlin, who hails from Missouri City, Texas, is a newcomer to *EQMM*, but he has already penned five well-reviewed suspense novels for Ballantine Books. His debut piece for us is a *noir*ish tale of a cop and a kid—a kid who picks the wrong mark. Readers who enjoy it may want to take a look at Hemlin's 1998 book *A Catered Christmas* or his new novel (11/99) *Dead Man's Broth* (both Ballantine). ☨

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I glanced at the kid. I needed to remember he was there.

"You're in pretty good shape for an old man," he continued. "I mean, you seem solid except for looking sick. Were you a Marine? What do you do for a living?"

"You nervous, kid? Or do you always babble at people before you jack them."

"Oh, man—"

"I'm a cop," I told him.

He quickly pulled his hands out of his pockets, rubbed them across his hair, and shifted his weight in the seat. "No way."

A smile touched the corners of my mouth. With my left hand, I opened my denim coat and showed the .38 snug inside my shoulder holster. Then I reached into the inside pocket, took out my badge, and waved it at him.

"What's the matter, kid? Now you look pale."

"Nothing. Tired."

Not wanting him to get a good look at the ID, I slipped the badge back into my pocket. "You're not carrying, are you, kid?"

"No, no."

"You weren't going to jack me for my car, were you?"

"I—I broke down."

"I didn't see a set of disabled wheels back there."

"It was there, but with the weather and all—"

While my left hand gripped the steering wheel, I reached under my jacket with my right, pulled out the gun, and pointed the barrel at him. This little action was turning into a welcome distraction.

"Give me your piece, kid, or I'll blow your head off."

"I don't have one."

I cocked it.

"Okay, man, be cool!" He drove his right hand into his pocket.

"Slowly!" I snapped. "Two fingers, and you'd better pray I don't hit any bumps."

He obeyed. In the glare from the Chevron station I saw the gun was a 9mm. Not bad.

"Open the console and gently put it in," I ordered.

He did.

"Okay, kid, what's your game?"

"Would you put the gun down?"

"I'll put the damn gun down when I'm ready to," I shouted, waving the cold steel in his face. He pressed against the door and inched as far away from me as he could be. "You ain't no hardened juvenile and this ain't Halloween, kid. Who you trying to fool?"

"Please, put the gun down. I wasn't going to shoot you—"

"Unless you had to," I cut him off.

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"I just wanted your car," he said, voice cracking. "It was part of the initiation."

I fell silent, eased the hammer on the gun, and rested my hand in my lap.

"Gang, huh?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?!"

"Sir, yes, sir."

"Good boy. You were in the car at the light, the car behind me. You're one of the assholes who hit my trunk."

"The plan was for you to get out," the kid said, talking fast, "for me to pull the gun, scare you, and take the car. But you weren't moving. You weren't doing anything. So they made me get out of the backseat, and they left."

"And now your friends are following us," I said.

"No, I was supposed to meet them behind Dairy Queen after I got your car. I wasn't going to hurt you."

"Kid, you're an idiot."

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked.

"On a normal night I'd have taken you in and busted you." I shook my head. We came to another red light, and I clicked the doors locked. "I don't know," I added.

"Why not?"

"Kid, why did I pick you up?" I asked myself more than him. The light changed to green and I stepped on the gas. "For company? For a diversion? Or maybe for help. I could use a little help."

"You going to let me walk, man, I mean, sir?"

"You got a record?"

He huddled back down.

"You on parole?"

"No."

"So I was right. You're a punk wannabe. A punk with a nice gun. Some rich bastard's son who thinks it'll be cool to be in a gang. What's the matter, Daddy away too much on business and Mommy spending all her time with her girlfriends, or boyfriends?"

"Shut up, man, my mother's dead!"

The gun twitched in my lap. For a second he'd squared his shoulders. As quickly as it rose, though, the boldness withered and he slumped back against the door.

"How old are you?" I asked. "Sixteen, seventeen?"

"Eighteen."

"Adult age. Still in school?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't much older than that when I joined the police force. Never thought I'd be a cop, and then when I was I always figured

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I'd make it big as a writer—the next Joseph Wambaugh, you know. But goddamn if the years didn't go by and other cops came and went. Not me. I watched, did my job. Got off the beat and into plain clothes. It was supposed to be a big deal. Maybe it was. It's all I've got left. My wife died in a car accident, my kid drank himself to death, and his widow is afraid to be in the same city with her idiot first husband—" I stopped. "I hate senseless talking," I added. "Especially when it's me."

He shifted in his seat, drew a hand across his forehead.

"Pretty scared, ain't you, kid?" I glanced into the rearview mirror. Nothing. For the past mile I'd been watching my back. Apparently the kid was telling the truth.

"How come you're not sweating anymore?" he asked.

"Guess 'cause I'm talking."

"You said you don't like talking."

"Normally, I don't. But this ain't a normal night."

He hesitated. My mind began to open up. I was going to tell him about my son Vance liking opera—he got it from his mother—and writing (a better writer than me, he was) and directing plays; I thought maybe I'd tell the kid about the one that was supposed to open—

"You going to kill me?" he asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"Hell, why would I do that?!" I snapped. "Just 'cause a spoiled-ass shit like you would have killed me first if given the chance doesn't mean I'll return the favor."

"Man, you're sick."

I nodded.

"You're no cop," he muttered.

"Wrong, kid!" I said. "I'm no father. I'm no husband. I'm no writer. But I am a cop."

"Okay, okay, man, put the gun down, sir, please."

Realizing I'd pointed the weapon at his head, I returned the piece to my lap. "Isn't there something you want to be, kid?"

"Alive tomorrow."

"Hold that thought."

He said nothing. I swore if he began to cry I'd put that bullet in him.

The fog was as heavy as dry-ice vapors. It reminded me of a play Vance was in years ago. His strong point was not acting but I'd enjoyed those days, and when he met Cheryl, even though she had two kids, I thought he had a chance of being happy. Except for that bastard Gus.

And I never did get grandchildren of my own.

"What do you want me to help you with?" he asked.

"What?" We were close to the Sugar Land police station, and I drove carefully. Not that getting pulled over would've been a prob-

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lem. Flash the badge, explain the passenger, or not, and I'd be on my way.

"You said something about, something I have to, you're going to make me do."

"Calm down."

"You won't kill me. You're a cop. Cops have laws—"

"Maybe you should be a lawyer," I said, cutting him off. "No, then you'd realize the law is like this fog. And how much justice can you net with mist? Of course, justice isn't the magician's focus. He wants to entertain himself, fool you, and win. Doesn't matter if the veil melts in the morning sun. The illusion was there when you needed it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Be careful or you'll sink into tonight's fog."

I knew where I was going. I remembered the plan and this little diversion was fitting in perfectly. At Highway 6, I cruised to Old Richmond Road. There was a field. It came back to me, all of it.

Gus. There were two things about him: He had money, and he was obsessed. Dog fights in court over custody and property. Then, when Vance and Cheryl married, Gus had the crazy idea they should pay him child support. After he lost again, he went after Vance.

Vance was teaching high-school drama and Gus did the one thing that could truly hurt him. He accused Vance of child abuse and leading a deviant lifestyle. Being associated with the city's theater community, Vance had a lot of gay friends. Another messy custody battle followed. The time away from work and the publicity took their toll. Vance lost his job. I tried to help, in my own way, and Gus threatened me with police brutality. I never hit the bastard. Maybe I should've, and taken some of the pressure off Vance. The whole five years they were married it was fight, court, fight, court—Gus wanted Cheryl bad. Back or dead, I wasn't sure. At the very least, broken. But Vance was the one who broke. He was my kid, but he was never tough.

In the end, though, he wasn't the only one to die.

I coasted the car to the side of the road.

"The fog was God's gift," I said.

"God?" he croaked.

I laughed softly. When I cut the lights it was as dark as the inside of a gun barrel. I opened up the console and took out his 9mm, checked the clip. Full. Nice feel. This was what I should've used instead of shaking down a crackhead for his piece. Would've been much tidier. I lifted the .38 from my holster, dropped it into the console, and replaced it with the 9mm.

"You're going to help me," I told him again. "Now."

"How?" The kid tried hard, but his voice quivered.

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I tugged on the lever to unlock the trunk. It popped up behind us like a black ghost rising. The kid jumped and I shoved open the door, kicking the dome light on, and stepped onto the gravelly road. I shut the door behind me.

I knew it would work.

"Get out, kid," I called as I walked around to the back of the car, grabbed the shovel and flashlight, and closed the trunk.

"Turn around, cop."

As I faced him I heard the snapping of the .38 being cocked. I stood still. He squeezed the trigger. Click. Click.

I raised the 9mm. His face went pale as the fog.

"You son of a bitch," he said.

"I knew you'd kill out of fear," I told him, slowly, deeply. The hackles rose on the back of my neck. "You fear me too much to ever let me go alive. I'll have to remember that. Now, gently put the gun on the car. You throw it," I added, "you die."

He did as I said.

"Good. Step away from the car." I drew a handkerchief from my pocket, wrapped the gun in it, and tucked it into my jacket, beside my badge.

"Cold, kid?"

He shook his head.

"Stop trembling." I tossed him the shovel and waved the gun. "Walk."

He hesitated, started to say something, but I cut him off.

"Your other choice is for me to shoot you too."

The ground was soft and moist. I kept the light on the kid's back. We went a few hundred yards to the southwest until we came to a grove of pecan trees. In the event the field was ever developed it was unlikely these big old trees would be destroyed. They'd be part of a park, or worked into the richer lots.

"Dig."

"Why are you doing this? I wasn't going to kill you."

"Click, click," I said.

"I won't dig my own grave."

I hoped to hell he wasn't going to start crying.

"You dumb ass, Vance, it isn't for you."

"Who?"

"It isn't for you, yet," I said quickly.

"You're crazy. I don't believe you."

"Kid, you have two choices. Start shoveling and trust me at my word, or I kill you. If I have to dig, there's a price to be paid."

The shovel twitched in his hands like one of the smaller limbs on a pecan tree. Then there was the raw sound of earth being sliced and the growing, rich smell of soil turned over. I wedged the flashlight on a large, downed pecan limb.

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"And don't get any foolish ideas of throwing dirt in my eyes or swinging the shovel at me. Shit like that is for the movies. You'll be dead before the spade hits the ground."

For half an hour we said nothing. The fog bent around us and cut off the view of the tops of the great pecan trees. Covering the ground were shelled nuts. Finally I picked one up and crushed it between my palms, the 9mm resting in the crook of my arm, against my chest. The snap from the cracking nut caused the kid to bolt upright.

"Bit jumpy, ain't you?" I asked, picking out chunks of pecan meat.

"You're a sick man."

"When I was your age," I said, "my mother would give me the keys to the car and send me to places like this to sack up pecans for her. About this time of year, too. Pies for Thanksgiving. Come to think of it, Thanksgiving's only two or three weeks away, isn't it? Well, maybe we'll both have a lot to be thankful for this year, kid. Maybe you'll be out of the carjacking business, out of the gang scene. You might end up drinking yourself to death. Guess that remains to be seen."

I brushed the pecan shells to the ground. The kid was knee-deep in the hole, sweaty and soiled.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked. "Night's slipping away."

The shovel struck dirt.

"How tall are you, kid?"

"Five-eleven."

"Make it about your height."

He paused. "Please, sir."

I cracked another pecan shell. He went back to his digging; small sprays of dirt, now clay, were added to the mound at the hole's edge.

Vance loved pecan pie, I thought, and dropped the shell to the ground. I stood silent as the fog, until I realized the kid had stopped working.

"Not very talkative, kid. That's good. I hate a man who babbles under pressure." I walked over to the hole. "Good. Good job. Looks about right." I pointed the gun at him.

"Lie in it," I ordered.

"What?"

"Lie in it."

"Please, sir."

"I want to check its size. Kid, you can do it alive or dead."

He slowly lowered himself into the wide, long hole and rested on his back.

"How's it feel, kid?" I asked.

He opened his mouth. No words came out.

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"What a place to be for eternity, huh?" I said. "Empty field, black walls, no marker, bedding straight from hell."

The kid suddenly sat up and scrambled out on his hands and knees. I took a step back. He vomited until there was nothing but dry heaves.

"Come on, kid," I said when he calmed. "Let's go." I picked up the flashlight.

"Where?"

"Back to the car. Leave the shovel."

I followed him and added, "I'll need to help you with this, but I'm not taking the gun out of my hands so don't get smart." I ran the flashlight at him, noticed his pants around his groin were wet. When we reached the car I shined the light on the trunk's keyhole and opened it up. A short gasp escaped the kid.

"Don't worry, Van—kid, it's only Gus. He didn't jack cars, he jacked people's lives."

The body was wrapped in a thick blanket.

"Pull it out," I told him, "carefully. If he comes unwrapped, your stomach will be through your throat."

"The blanket's wet," he said, more of an absent thought than anything else.

"Don't be shy."

"Oh, God," he said, "what am I doing?"

"Saving your own ass. Do it!"

It finally happened. The kid began to cry as he fiercely tugged. In a minute, Gus was a thud against the ground. I flashed the light in the trunk and pulled out the garbage bag I'd laid down. Not too bad. I closed it. It'd have been almost impossible to keep the trunk fully clean. I tossed the bag on top of Gus.

"Pick it up like this," I explained. "We'll use the blanket as a kind of gurney." I kept the gun in my hand and tucked the flashlight under my armpit. Twice the kid stumbled and almost fell, mumbling all along about carrying a dead body.

It seemed forever to me before we reached the hole. I could only imagine how the kid felt.

"Put it by the side, here," I said. "Good. Back away. Stop." I glanced at Gus. "Well, he's a little crooked but you made the hole nice and wide and we ain't waiting for rigor mortis to go away."

I put the heel of my boot against the remains of Gus and shoved him into the hole. "Here's to you, you sorry son of a bitch," I said, and kicked the trash bag in on top.

I turned the light to the kid. "Common sense says I should leave you with Gus."

"Please, sir, no. You gave me your word." He was barely audible.

"You think my word's worth anything?"

His eyes darted.

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"Don't try to run. I made the decision when we first parked the car. Fill the hole. Go on, pick up the shovel. Good. Now, put the dirt back."

The kid began covering Gus.

"I'm going to let you go," I told him as I picked up another pecan. "Keep filling, and I'll tell you why. Gus has ruined enough young lives. You don't need to be the last in his wake. But don't get any bright ideas about running to the cops."

"I won't, sir."

"I know you won't, because if you do I'll confess we were in it together. You iced Gus for a few hundred. You're eighteen, you'd be tried as an adult. I've got your prints on the gun, remember? Not mine. As you noticed, I've got gloves on. I'll say that you picked me up on Main and that I helped you bury the body.

"I'm going to be your guardian angel, kid. Your black angel. If I see you jacking people anymore, or find you in a goddamn gang, I'll blow the whole thing open. I'm old and alone."

"I won't say a word," he about whispered. His pace had picked up. It only took a few minutes to fill in the grave. I had him step down the mound, then roll the large pecan limb I'd wedged the flashlight in over the top.

His breathing was in short gasps. "I was sure I was dead," he muttered.

"Good. We understand each other. There's one more thing you have to do," I said, and continued before he could reply. "Drive the car to Galveston and park it where it'll take some time to find, to discover that it's been abandoned. It's Gus's," I added.

"Is that all?"

"You might want to wipe the car down. Your prints are all over it."

"I can do that."

"Don't sound so damn happy, kid. There will come a day when you'll wish I had killed you."

"I'll carry this to my grave," he told me, not listening.

"Yes." I took the shovel from him, thinking that his prints were on it, too.

"We both will," I finally said. ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

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TILTING THE TOURNAMENT

by Clayton Emery

In fleshing out his Robin Hood stories, Clayton Emery relies on avid research of the medieval period, a thorough knowledge of the literature that has come down to us involving the Robin Hood legend, and his own free-wheeling imagination. His tales are among the most evocative of current historicals. More are to come now that he has finished the gargantuan task of judging stories for the '98 Edgar Allan Poe awards. ¶

So this knight—he doesn't have a name in the story—was traveling to a tournament to settle a debt of honor. But he came to a crossroads and found a shrine to the Virgin Mary. So he stopped to pay homage, because he was so pious, but he lingered until dusk, see? He mounted and rode hell-for-leather, but it was too late. The tourney was over. But everyone acclaimed him champion because the Holy Virgin *herself* had descended from Heaven in disguise and jousted in his stead! D'ya see, Rob? You'll win if your heart is pure! D'ya see?"

"I see." Robin hadn't heard a word. A helmet wrapped his ears in straw padding and leather, his war-horse jigged under him with tackle jingling, and the shouting never stopped.

Robin Hood was one of two hundred knights in two long lines undulating down the tourney field like shattered rainbows. A roaring crowd pressed a rope fence, seemingly all of London, who'd enjoyed the opening parade and now chanted for the Grand Charge to begin. All along the lines horses stamped and their masters fidgeted while marshals in blue-and-gold tabards inspected lances, running both hands over blunt tips to assure all were wood with no iron, true "lances of peace." Tournaments were for practicing war, not waging it, even though three hundred knights battling for two days had yielded eleven deaths, so far. Robin was soaked in sweat, his gauntlets squelching, his helmet steamy. The horse staled, a

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rank salt smell, and its rider wished he might also.

As Marian chattered, Robin Hood studied other knights, since any might become an opponent or partner. He waited between a red-clad knight on a black horse and a gold-clad knight on a white. No faces showed, for all wore the new-fangled "bucket helms" introduced in the last crusade. Farther down the line, a red knight with a white eagle claw painted on his gypon and pennon fought a blond horse that bucked and crow-hopped. He pounded the horse's head to subdue it, and Robin hoped the man would be dumped and trampled. A pair of priests sprinkled holy water and Latin blessings, defying Pope Celestine's ban on tournaments.

Hidden inside his helmet, Robin Hood grinned like a wolf. Despite the danger and madness of jousting, these bold lines on a bright summer's day were a glorious spectacle for God and Man. And he was ready. He wore a new green helm bisected by a Maltese cross, a gypon fresh-painted with his family's hunting horn and wheat-sheaf crest, his father's sword and a new-forged dagger, and he carried an ash lance painted green with three red rings, same as his famous arrows. Even his mount, a high-stepping roan *destrier,* was decked out, not with a horsecloth, but with green ribbons braided into her tackle and tail. Sex notwithstanding, the children had named her Puck, and she panted to run.

Around the field, marshals signaled all knights were safely armed, then scampered for cover. The crowd roared approval. Robin Hood dragged up his helmet. Dark-haired Marian hung at his stirrup, dark eyes brimming with tears. She sniffed, "What I meant was, I love you! Please be careful!"

Smiling, Robin bent and kissed her. "Don't fret, leman. I can't be hurt, for my heart is pure! Or yours is, anyway!" Allan-a-Dale's son acted as squire and held the war-horse's bridle. "Allan, remember! Keep off the field, no matter what happens to me. You could get killed out there. Understand? Then go!" Marian and the boy retreated under the ropes.

High on a canopied balcony sat the Lord Mayor of London, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and King Richard's chief justice (since the king campaigned in France), who waved to begin. The tournament's king-of-arms raised his staff. A kettledrum rolled. Two hundred knights lowered lances. Robin Hood couched the butt in his armpit, settled his shield on his left arm, scrooched his bottom in the saddle.

For a moment all was calm. Pennons snapped. Horses' ears twitched.

A trumpet blared.

"Go, girl! *Hey, yup!"* Swept up in a giant wave, Robin Hood and Puck walked, quick-walked, cantered, then galloped. Neck and neck, knee-to-knee charged the line until the ground rolled by

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dizzyingly and eight hundred hooves drummed like thunder. The opposing line of knights grew tall and thick as a thorn hedge until details leapt out: a horse's brown eyes rimmed white, brass tacks on a bridle, a black helmet with black eyeholes. Robin's vision suddenly filled with a white gypon and red lion and matching shield. *Keep the tip up, keep your shield close, keep your knees together, keep your arse down . . .* The painted lion loomed large as a real one, a wooden tip reached for Robin, who aimed dead—

Robin's lance swept past brown ears and slammed his opponent's shield just left of center. The blunt tip skittered and snagged the iron rim, smashing the lion shield and knocking the oncoming lance wide. All in a second. Something belted Robin's shoulder, a horse's rump banged his knee, then Puck burst clear of the line where the crowd hollered in the distance. As trained, the horse dropped to a canter, then quick walk, then slow walk. Robin raised his lance but found it curiously light. Waving it before his eyeholes, he saw a stub only two feet long jutting above his gauntlet. He laughed. "A chaste lance tells a craven hand!" Puffing, Robin tossed the broken lance and wheeled his horse to see what was left of the Grand Charge.

Chaos. Horses milled and spun. A few knights were dismounted, a few on their backs. Riders calmed frightened beasts and Robin remembered to praise his. Two knights had their tackle tangled. One knight dangled from a stirrup by a pulped ankle. A grudger had drawn sword and slashed at a foe while men-at-arms interposed halberds. Squires dodged flashing hooves to aid their masters, but one boy was kicked and fell hard. Marshals and London city guards pushed the crowd back. Sweepers cleared splinters and manure. Judges tallied grievances and heralds shouted incoherent results. A new widow wailed. The band thumped and wheedled while a dance troupe capered before the balcony. Priests scurried to drape monks' cassocks over dying men, for a knight killed in tournament was denied a church burial—unless he first took the cloth.

Robin couldn't see the white knight he'd struck, didn't know if he'd unseated the man. He did note the red knight who'd abused his mount suffered a common problem: His bucket helm of soft steel had been bashed so hard he couldn't pull it off, so his squire led him by the hand to find an armorer. The archer muttered, "Serves you right, you vicious lout."

One scene set Robin's curiosity buzzing. Judges clustered around a body stretched on the field while more officials ran up, then more. Kneeing Puck to the sidelines, the outlaw dismounted and tossed young Allan his reins and helmet. Raking back sweaty curls, he strode towards the commotion with his scabbard banging his calves. Marian slipped under the ropes and trotted to catch up. "Are you hurt?"

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"Eh? Oh, no." He grinned and she smiled in relief.

The downed knight lay on his side because a long red lance jutted from his breast. His yellow gypon was bloody from neck to belt. A priest administered last rites while marshals pointed and argued. Robin Hood shouldered close and swore in surprise.

Catching the shaft in two hands, he pressed a shoe against the dead man's breast and yanked the lance free. It was painted red with a white spiral and bore a bloodied pennon. Robin Hood wiped off gore with his gypon's hem. "I'll be damned."

The lance was shod with an iron spike long as a man's hand and tapered like a dart, with the tail firmly socketed in a shaft sawn square.

"Deuced queer. And look." Marian plucked something from the dead man's breast. A red splinter big as a man's finger had pierced the cloth gypon but been stopped by leather-studded armor. Robin Hood tried to match the splinter to the lance, but there were no chips or gouges. Unsure what it meant, but reluctant to discard it, Robin Hood slipped the splinter down his mail shirt.

He thumbed the iron spike with a frown. "I've never seen such a thing! A Norman war lance is like a long arrowhead with a collar outside the wood so it don't fetch up when it strikes. And how did the marshals miss this?" Unfurling the bloody pennon showed an eagle claw, white on a red field. "Whose device?"

"Here now!" The lance was snatched away by a chunky pock-marked official. King's colors edged with ermine marked him as the Tower of London's master-at-arms, today overseeing the tournament as king-of-arms. "Who the hell are you?"

Normally Robin declined to use his titles, but now it seemed expedient. "Earl of Huntingdon, Sir Robert Locksley, elsewise Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest." Earls ranked highest on the social ladder below royalty, but it was the latter name, heard in ballads, that made knights and officials murmur. "I ask again. Whose lance?"

A junior marshal consulted the list of contenders, where a heraldic crest was sketched beside each name. "Sir Redvers of Kersey! Is he here?"

"God's love!" barked a burly knight. Everyone turned. His black coat displayed an eagle claw before a red chevron. "His helm was stove in so he couldn't doff it! He was led off the field!"

"Show me!" said Robin.

"Hold hard! *I'm* in charge!" snarled the king-of-arms. Feeling Marian's gentle hand on his elbow, Robin Hood nodded and begged pardon. The official's anger no doubt stemmed from guilt, since his marshals had inspected all the lances. "Show *me,* by your leave!"

Robin and Marian squeezed into the party that entered the "knights' village" north of the tourney field. Tents of all shapes and sizes were plain or brightly painted in house colors. The black

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knight conducted them to a conical marquee with roof and seams striped red. Painted and plain lances, neatly tied in a bundle, and a banner pole leaned against a weapons rack. Three picketed blond horses cropped hay.

The guide threw back the tent flaps to reveal piles of horse tackle, travel chests and sacks, armor and clothes. On an erratic bedroll lay a man, lopsided as a discarded doll or a drunkard. His red gypon was bunched around his neck, exposing chain mail and baldric and sword. The black knight froze. "Jesus wept!"

Robin and Marian crowded after the king-of-arms and marshals and judges. Marian, who knew healing, pushed past, dropped to one knee, pried up the knight's eyelid, touched his eyeball and saw it flinch. Tilting his head wet her hands with blood. "Someone's like to have crushed his skull!"

"His helmet was knocked in." The burly knight pointed to the battered red helm, which lay near the knight's hand.

The king-of-arms picked up the helmet, inspected it, tossed it down. "Bah! Let me see his other lances!"

Marshals pushed back the throng at the tent flaps. Outside, officials untied the bundle of lances. Robin Hood trailed and craned his neck but kept mum. Three lances were plain wood, for practice, two were painted red and white for jousting, but all were blunt, without spikes or crow's-feet. The king-of-arms threw the bloodied lance among them and stamped back into the tent. Momentarily alone, Robin Hood tucked the death lance out of sight under the tent wall, though he couldn't have said why.

Inside, amidst hurly-burly, Robin Hood picked up the fallen red helm and found it crumpled along one side. He showed the black knight. "This doesn't seem crimped tight enough to trap a man's head. And did Sir Redvers pluck it off and then black out? Or did an armorer pull it off? Or did his squire— Where *is* his squire?"

"Yes, where is that dastard?" The black knight's shaggy blond hair and beard were damp as Robin's own from jousting. "I'm Quincy, steward for Sir Redvers's manse in Sudbury. My father was vassal to his father."

Marian wet a rag from a water bottle and mopped Redvers's face and scalp wound. "Twas a savage blow. He mayn't wake ever, poor soul."

Sir Redvers's servants had been found, and the king-of-arms stepped outside to harangue them. Marian asked Quincy, "Would Sir Redvers flee the field because he killed a man?"

"Never. He's a mickle courteous knight."

Robin Hood frowned. "Did Sir Redvers know the knight in yellow? Would he wish him dead?"

"I've no idea. I never saw him before. Who was he?"

A junior marshal reported, "Sir Peter of Bath."

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"Clear across the kingdom from East Anglia."

"So he cou'n't have known him," said Quincy.

"They may've crossed swords *en meleé,"* Robin objected. "We've had two days of hard fighting. And feuding."

"But could Sir Redvers pick him out in the charge?" Marian arranged the felled man comfortably and drew a blanket over his breast. "We saw you all crammed into line cheek by jowl. You don't choose opponents aforehand, do you?"

"Nay," said Sir Quincy. "It's chary enough to charge straight ahead."

"He's right." Swept up in an irresistible mass, Robin had simply attacked a random opponent as the lines closed. "It'd be the devil's dilemma to vie for a special man."

"Mayhaps he was killed accidentally," mused Marian.

"No one can find his infernal squire!" The king-of-arms returned, angrier than ever. "And twas no accident Redvers plied that iron-tipped lance! That was deliberate!"

"No, I meant—any dead man would do. No." Marian persisted, "Any man *dead* would do."

"Bells have tongues too, and hollow heads. Stifle your prattle, woman."

"Venerate the Virgin, sir, and those cast in Her mold," Robin grated. "How mean you, Marian?"

"I *mean,"* Marian's brown eyes burned luminous in the tent's red-yellow glow, "if you can't strike with certainty, perhaps any victim will do. Killing an innocent man would be a ghastly game, but t'would mark Sir Redvers as a murderer."

"Poppycock!" snorted the king-of-arms. "Sir Redvers killed Sir Peter plain as plain! Wielding that war lance'll cost his spurs, if not his life!"

"How is it," drawled Robin Hood, "he did wield an iron-tipped lance? Your marshals inspected all our tips before the charge. No knight left or entered the field, nor accepted a lance over the ropes or from a squire. So how'd the iron-shod lance gain the field?"

"Damned if I know! Satan must've sent it into his hand! Or some alchemist transformed it with witchery. We've seen that before."

Marian rolled her eyes. "'Beware the door with too many keys.' What is it, Rob?"

The outlaw chief only shook his head and stood rooted, thinking. Marian wiped her hands on a blanket and waited patiently.

Curses sounded at the flaps, and into the tent bulled a knotty dark man in a blue gypon with a yellow trefoil of arrowheads. He carried a three-lobed sword and matching dagger high in front, as if eager to draw steel, and his spurs were gilt. A grizzled man-at-arms attended him. The blue knight stepped straight to Sir Redvers and

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felt the pulse in his neck. The king-of-arms asked who he was.

"Sir Stillwell, Viscount of Foriers!"

"Of Kersey," added Sir Quincy. "Cousin to Sir Redvers."

"Cousin?" Robin Hood echoed.

Sir Stillwell spun on his heel and lifted his bearded chin. "Is that some business of yours?"

"Not a whit. I beg pardon." Yet Robin asked Sir Quincy, "If Sir Redvers is derogant, stripped of his knighthood, even beheaded or hanged, who profits?"

"Eh?" Sir Redvers's vassal looked puzzled, as did others.

Robin Hood pointed. "Sir Redvers wears a king's ransom in chain mail, and gilt spurs, and a sword from Milan. He's got servants aplenty and three bonny horses. His fief must be extensive."

"Oh, aye. He's got a big keep and three manors, hunting lodges and granaries and orchards and what all."

"And heirs? Who inherits?"

"His sons are just babes." The burly knight made a face. "The castle'd descend t'—"

"Curb your tongue, Sir Quincy, lest I jerk it from your jaw! I'll not have my name bandied by a homager!" Sir Stillwell shook a fist, then swung it toward Robin. "And you, sir, ask impertinent questions!"

"Milord Earl, you'd best call me, Viscount. And my questions beggar for answers."

"Fie! You besmirch me and my cousin!" Stillwell snatched a gauntlet from his belt. "Will you apologize?"

"Will you apologize, *milord.*"

"I challenge thee!" Sir Stillwell flung the glove at Robin's face. "To combat! To the death!"

England's quickest archer snatched the glove from the air and lobbed it back. "Unknot thyself, pray. New blood won't wash out an old stain."

"Your blood will expunge the stain on my honor!"

Robin Hood swallowed his temper, refusing to play along, then shot blind. "I don't recall your crest illumined the parade or the Grand Charge."

The blue knight was too furious to speak, or feigned so. His man-at-arms growled, "My lord the viscount hurt his leg in a joust yestereve, so couldn't ride this morn."

"Yet he'd joust now?" Robin asked innocently. "I take advantage."

"And how is it, good sirrah," Marian pouted in thought, "all these knights look newly baptized, so wrung with sweat are they from jousting, and so do you?"

Stillwell unconsciously raked back matted hair, then sneered to Robin Hood, "Muzzle your bitch."

The archer's hand flashed. His sword sizzled from its scabbard

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to slit the tent's roof, admitting a long whisper of sunlight. Sir Stillwell jumped back on two good legs. Robin Hood barked, "Arm thyself, vagabond!"

"Bide, Rob." Marian's strong hand pressed down his arm. To Stillwell she pronounced, "We'll meet you in the lists."

Stillwell stormed off with his servant in tow. The scowling king-of-arms had the bout tallied on the afternoon roster, ordered a junior to watch over the benumbed Redvers, then departed, as did others.

Robin Hood sheathed his sword and stroked his beard with a shaking hand. "Clever, that Stillwell, to spy a way to avoid questions."

"You've already one duel to surmount," sighed Marian. "S'why we partook of this folly in the first place."

"Sing hey for the morrow. Today I'll bounce Stillwell on the turf and see if he cracks. But how is't I always suffer these disaccords?"

Marian tapped his armored breast. "Ask how a lodestone attracts iron."

Robin Hood shared a pavilion tent with two partnered brothers from Cumbria. Most of his gear was either new-made or bought or lent, for he truly did give to the poor. Marian and young Allan helped him shuck his gypon and the Damascan mail borrowed from Gilbert of the White Hand, which constricted Robin like snakeskin. Donning a tattered shirt, the outlaw breathed freely for the first time since dawn.

Then stooped, for the red splinter had fallen from his shirt. Robin frowned. "Where does this damned thing *belong?"*

Marian patted a blanket beside her. "Eat." Ale and bread and cheese made a light dinner, then the couple rested at the tent's mouth, for it was hot, with midsummer just a fortnight past. Marian napped, but Robin was too wrought-up to rest. "I'll visit the jakes. 'Haps 'pon my return we can close the flaps and tilt in the blankets."

Marian smiled with her eyes closed. "First we needs inspect your lance, see it be blunt or sharp."

Chuckling, Robin tousled her hair and passed outside. He checked that young Allan guarded and tended Puck, found the boy dampening the horse's legs with water, drying them with grass, then currying out the chaff. Satisfied, the Knight of Sherwood threaded a maze seeking the "necessaries."

The knights' village gradually merged into the fair that had sprung up in this tree-ringed vale north of London. Jumbled together were wooden stages showing miracle plays, animal pens, a mock castle and ship, archery ranges, gambling dens, football games, cockfights, water wagons, rings for Cumberland wrestling, open-air chapels, pig roasts, traveling shrines, heaps of manure and vegetables and hides and ashes, a bearded lady, fan-tailed peacocks,

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dancing bears and monkeys, drunken pirates, scolding friars, near-naked women, screaming children, barking dogs, caroling hawkers, capering jugglers and acrobats. And ale bars at every hand. If any man in the crowd were sober, Robin Hood didn't meet him.

Distracted, the outlaw failed to recognize immediately the grizzled man who stepped from behind a hayrick. The man's stance and face were grim—

—and belonged to Sir Stillwell's man-at-arms. Robin whirled, his speed taking the aggressor by surprise.

Then Robin was surprised as something smashed against his head.

"A bout of honor *to the death!* between the Earl of Huntingdon, Sir Robert Locksley, in green, and the Viscount of Foriers, Sir Stillwell, in the blue!"

The herald boomed Norman French to London's highborns through a leather megaphone while another herald echoed Saxon English to the masses at the ropes. People booed Sir Stillwell and cheered Robin Hood, having picked favorites in two days of pageantry.

Signaled, Sir Stillwell rammed heels into his blue-draped white warhorse. The two exploded through the roped-off southern entrance, thundered onto the tourney field, and reined back hard to chop grass and dust. The crowd jeered, then fell silent and waited. Stillwell had the field to himself, and he smiled inside his hawk-faced helm.

Marshals checked rolls and dispatched pages. The crowd murmured and catcalled. The king-of-arms signaled the herald to announce the next bout when a cheer arose at the north entrance.

"God's wounds!" Sir Stillwell gaped as onto the field rode a knight in green bucket helm and gypon who carried a kite shield and sword and lance. The roan war-horse stepped lively, so ribbons fluttered, while young Allan trotted alongside with spare lances. "It *can't* be! It can't *be!"*

No inspection was made, no rules given. The knights were only admonished to use "no magic, nor charm, nor potion for this contest, so God might favor the righteous and decide the outcome." As would iron-speared lances and razor-sharp swords. Yet Sir Stillwell trotted his horse to the field's far end in a daze. "How? *How?"*

A drum warned to prepare. *Bom-bom!* The two knights squared off across seventy yards of scarred turf. The blue-clad Sir Stillwell craned on his white horse like a raven crouched on a chapel, trying desperately to grasp what he saw. It was impossible, but there sat Sherwood's knight, though slumped in the saddle with his upright lance wobbling.

A second warning. *Bom-bom, bom-bom!* The crowd roared like a

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rainstorm as the knights lowered lances. Stillwell swore in perplexity. He watched Robin Hood brush his helmet back to better see. The clumsy bucket was loose—

In a flash, Stillwell understood why his opponent looked so small and ill-equipped. Horrified, he croaked aloud, "Wait! Stop—"

Came the charge. *Bombombombombombombombom . . .*

Trained to war, Sir Stillwell's horse launched into a gallop. Stillwell gulped and hung on and lifted his lance tip by instinct. Wind sailed through the eyeholes of his helmet, his body thrummed to the drumming hooves, yet he cursed steadily, damned by honor to finish this farce. He steered straight for the four nails on Robin Hood's shield, aiming to skewer the painted hunting horn. Yet the green knight bounced in the saddle so wildly that his shield and lance bobbed. Mocking me, Stillwell thought. Fueled by fury, he crouched, raised his lance tip—

A double crash resounded as Stillwell's lance smashed Robin's green shield so it slammed into the green helm and bowled the Knight of Sherwood from the saddle.

Stillwell dropped his cracked lance and wheeled his war-horse. Flat on his back, the green knight kicked feebly as a crippled turtle. Yet still the blue knight cursed. Vaulting from the saddle, yanking out his sword, Stillwell marched to loom over his helpless opponent. "Damn your meddling! You've sullied my honor before all England!"

Panting, Stillwell lowered his sword point to his enemy's eyehole. Instantly the outlaw fell still, ripe for the death blow. Yet Stillwell flicked his wrist and flipped off the green helmet.

To reveal Marian.

"Body of Christ!" Stillwell's voice rang hollow in his own helmet, so he doffed it to clunk in the dust, a signal the joust was over. "I knew it! You've ruined me!"

Marian's dark eyes blazed as she struggled to her feet, dizzy but game. Blood ran from her nose and cheek where the helmet had bashed her. Raven hair entangled her sweaty face. Leaving her husband's shield lying, she drew his sword with two hands in clumsy gauntlets.

"So you *knew* twas I!" Marian spat blood and snot. *"How* did you know?"

"You tawdry jade— What?" Stillwell watched her heft the long blade. All around, the crowd had fallen silent.

"How did you know twas *I?"* Marian hoisted the sword like a darksome angel. *"How?"*

"Uh, I didn't!" Sir Stillwell was flummoxed. Nothing in a knight's training had prepared him to trounce a woman. Honor and horror held him hamstrung.

"I'll tell you!" Despite sagging armor and a scabbard that dragged in the dust, Marian advanced while the big bony knight retreated.

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"You knew Robin couldn't appear because you kidnapped him!"

"I—didn't!" Stillwell stumbled back from her basilisk glare.

"You did! Where is he?"

"I—" Stillwell's mouth worked, helpless even to speak.

Marian of Sherwood swung. Stillwell flung up his shield, and the sharp blade skinned paint and wood from his heraldic trefoil. Another blow struck sparks from the iron rim with a nerve-paring screech. Marian lunged to stab his belly, was parried by the shield. She swung high and left, and chipped more iron. All the while she shouted, *"Where's my husband? Where is he? Where?"*

Backpedaling, Stillwell caught his heel and crashed on his back. Two-handed, Marian slung the sword towards heaven to chop down—

—and Robin Hood hit her in a flying tackle.

As the dust settled, the husband clambered up, holding onto his wife for support. Despite his weakness, Robin Hood laughed to see Marian like a child playing dress-up. After him staggered the red Sir Redvers, pale and propped by two servants. Officials ran from all over while the crowd cheered louder than ever. The king-of-arms guffawed, "Mother of God, what a woman!"

"Oh, Robin!" Anger evaporated, Marian hugged Robin until he grunted. "I feared you'd been killed!"

"No, just bunged." Robin Hood rubbed his sore head. "Thanks be to a thick skull. I woke up tied under a pile of blankets and kicked my way out of a tent. But you shouldn't have posed as me, Marian! You could've been killed!"

"No, I couldn't, silly!" Marian hugged him again. "Love was my shield!"

"She should have been killed!" Sir Stillwell snapped. "Posing as a man to spoil our sport!"

"But she's not the only poser, is she?" Robin's face hardened. "You posed as Sir Redvers in the Grand Charge!"

"I? You're crack-pated!"

"I'm cracked because you crowned me, same as you did Sir Redvers early this morn!" Robin massaged his sore pate. "You donned his red gypon and joined the charge, but just barely, for his blond horse bucked at a strange rider. After the clash, you pretended your helm was jammed on, then slipped into Redvers's tent and switched gypons back. That's why his garment was bunched around his neck. It's why you were all a-sweat, belying your blither about a game leg."

"Why should *I* pose as Sir Redvers? It's balderdash!"

"You posed as him to kill a man with an illegal lance and thus poison his name!"

"And how might I, or anyone, bring a war lance onto the field?" the knight sneered.

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"With this." Robin Hood fished in his shirt and held up the long red splinter. "I wondered where it fit, since the murder lance bore no nicks. But I didn't search wide enough."

"You're mad!"

"See if Sir Quincy agrees." Robin pointed outside the rope barrier. Everyone turned. "He's been sifting the rubbish swept up after the Grand Charge."

Trotting as fast as armor allowed came Sir Quincy with the iron-tipped, red-spiraled lance and a clenched fist. Drawing near, he proffered red and white splinters speckled with horse manure. "S'all we could glean."

"It's enough. My gracious thanks." Robin Hood fanned the splinters across his palm, then closed his fist around the lance's gory spike. Together the splinters almost covered it. "A lance of peace concealed a lance of war."

Marshals gaped and the crowd strained as Robin explained. "Some joiner carved a thin wooden cup to cover the fatal spike, then painted the lance in Sir Redvers's colors so cleverly the marshals never saw the joint. Who'd notice, inspecting a hundred shafts? In the mad charge the hollow head shattered on a man's breast and gored him with iron. So was an innocent man killed and Sir Redvers condemned. Thus would Redvers's lands forfeit to his next of kin—to you, Stillwell."

"Fairy tales! There's nothing you can prove!"

"A witness will vouch. Sir Redvers's squire escorted you off the field, Stillwell, aiding your disguise. Then the dastard disappeared. No doubt he hides. What did you promise him? His own fief once Sir Redvers's lands descend to you?"

"I won't abide—"

"Will you abide that my wife turned the tables? As you posed as Sir Redvers, so she posed as me, and upset your plot. Marian's more clever than you with one eye shut!"

Enraged, the blue knight stooped to snatch up his sword, but the king-of-arms stamped on it. "Never again sword, Stillwell, and neither spurs. More likely a rope." Marshals caught the knight's elbows and hustled him away.

"Oh, Rob!" Marian snuffled blood on her husband's shirt. "I so feared you were dead and dumped in some ditch!"

"Oh, my pet. My honeybee. My shy little desert rose." Robin Hood kissed his wife's tousled hair. "Why did you meet Stillwell in the lists? Why not just run to the marshals?"

"I wanted to thrash him same as you would!" Marian piffed. "Imagine his shame conceding to a woman! And my heart was pure, so I couldn't lose!"

The wise husband didn't contradict, only chuckled. "And since an image of the Virgin jousted in my stead, neither could I." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE MAN FROM NILE K

by Edward D. Hoch

Though they'd returned frequently to Egypt over the years since they met and fell in love there, Leila had rarely spoken to Rand about the years before their marriage. She was a young archaeologist exploring the Nile River for Cairo University when they met, at a time when Russian technicians were strongly entrenched in the city. Though that seemed a lifetime ago, she was barely fifty now, still a handsome, vigorous woman.

"You're as lovely as the first time we met," he told her one night in bed.

"I was all wet the first time we met," she reminded him, "swimming in that polluted Nile River. They claim, now, it's worth your life to swim there."

"Sometimes what we don't know won't hurt us."

His joking words, spoken in the dark, brought no immediate response from her. He thought she'd dozed off until she finally spoke, a full two minutes later. "There's something you don't know that might hurt you, Jeffrey."

Her voice was suddenly so serious that he propped himself up on

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one elbow and turned toward her. "What's that?"

"In Egypt, before we met, I had a brief encounter with a man. I never told you about it."

"Encounter? You mean an affair?" He was wide awake now.

"I suppose you'd call it that. The man was Victor Constantine, a Russian. He had the most wonderful thick black hair."

The memories of his days in Egypt came flooding back. "He was one of the technicians?"

"Yes. More than that. He was an intelligence officer. That's why I never told you about him. He was one of the men you were fighting against, and the affair had been over for months by the time we met."

"What was his position?"

"You remember the houseboats along the Nile that the Russians used for their radio transmitters?"

"How could I forget? That's just what the Germans did during the war when Rommel was on Cairo's doorstep."

"Victor was stationed on one of those houseboats. It was code-named *Nile K.*"

"And you never told me?"

"Our relationship was over. There was no point in bringing it up."

Rand's eyes were becoming accustomed to the dark. He could almost make out her face, full of anguish. "Then why did you bring it up tonight?" he asked.

"Because Victor Constantine came to see me at the university yesterday afternoon."

After that, they got up and went into the kitchen. Leila poured them some juice and they talked about it. "I've been wanting to tell you since last night," she admitted. "I couldn't find an opportunity till just now in bed."

"And he showed up at Reading University yesterday?"

She nodded. "I had a message after my archaeology lecture that there was a man waiting to see me."

"After more than twenty-five years," Rand marveled.

Globe-trotting intelligence agent Jeffrey Rand, retired from Britain's Department of Concealed Communications, cracks a case from the comfort of home this time, when his wife's old flame, a former Russian spy, shows up in England. Rand is one of Mr. Hoch's most popular characters. The 1997 Rand story "One Bag of Coconuts" won the Anthony Award, an honor bestowed by Bouchercon, the largest convention of mystery fans in the world.

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"He noticed my name on that article I wrote last winter for the *Journal of Archaeology*. He wanted to see me again. He still has the accent and the black hair, though I suspect it's a dye-job now."

Rand snorted. "If you used your married name it wouldn't be so easy for old boyfriends to find you." He was trying to keep the conversation as light as possible.

"I told him I was married and that you were retired from government service. He said he'd like to meet you sometime."

"Did you invite him to dinner?"

"Hardly! We had coffee together at the faculty club and then he went on his way. It couldn't have lasted more than an hour."

Rand took a sip of juice. "But you didn't tell me about it yesterday."

"I was wondering if I should tell you at all. But then I decided I would. It was so far in the past, what difference could it make?"

"Is this man Constantine living in England now or just visiting?"

"I gather he's in London for a couple of weeks. He didn't tell me where he was staying, but he said he might call me before he left the country. I told him our number is in the book."

"Good," Rand said, somewhat sardonically. "Perhaps we can all get together."

He said nothing more to Leila regarding Victor Constantine in the days that followed. There was nothing more to be said, really. She was at the university three days a week and he had resurrected his long-delayed book about British Intelligence after the Second World War. In view of the Official Secrets Act, it was a difficult volume to write. He had to rely on previously published sources rather than his own inside knowledge.

It was midway through the following week when the telephone rang around ten in the morning. The voice on the other end asked for him by name. "Am I speaking with Mr. Rand?" Somehow he knew at once that it was Leila's former lover.

"Yes," Rand answered carefully.

"You do not know me. My name is Victor Constantine. I worked for the Soviet government in Egypt back in the early nineteen seventies. I would like very much to meet you for lunch, if that is possible."

"For what purpose?"

"Merely conversation. I knew your wife back in Egypt and—"

"She mentioned seeing you last week," Rand said, letting him know Leila had no secrets from him.

"I thought we might reminisce about the old days. I have very few friends in England."

And I'm not one of them, Rand thought. But he had to admit to

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a certain curiosity about Leila's lover from a quarter-century ago. "Were you thinking of today?"

"Yes, if you are free. Otherwise—"

"Today would be fine. Where shall we meet?"

"I'm at that new hotel on London Road, quite near the university. They have a nice dining room downstairs where we can pick up something light, if that is agreeable."

"Fine. Twelve o'clock?"

"I will see you then, Mr. Rand."

After he hung up, Rand considered phoning Leila with the news. But he knew she'd be giving her morning lecture at that time. He could wait and tell her all about it in the evening. He showered and changed into the casual jacket and pants he often wore around the city when he wasn't going into London.

The hotel was one of those modern American chains that beckoned tourists but did little for the British landscape. Rand spotted Victor Constantine as soon as he entered through the revolving doors. At the moment, he was the only man in the lobby of the right age, and there was about him a certain foreign appearance. Perhaps it was his suit, dark and double-breasted in the style of those Russian leaders at the May Day parades.

"Mr. Constantine?"

"Ah, Mr. Rand! So good to meet you at last!"

Rand had to admit the man was still handsome, even with his gray hair and furrowed brow. He was tall and carried himself well, with a firm grip as they shook hands. He led the way into the hotel dining room, where a few business people from the area had already arrived for lunch. When they were seated and had ordered drinks, Rand asked, "What brings you to Reading, Mr. Constantine?"

"Please call me Victor. And you are . . . Jeffrey?" He spoke perfect English, without a trace of an accent.

Rand nodded. "Leila mentioned seeing you a week or so back at the university. Have you been here all that time?"

"No, no! I came down from London that day and returned the same evening. This time I've come to see you, to talk of the old days when we were on opposite sides. I am a journalist now, you see." He passed Rand one of his business cards, which read: *Victor Constantine—East European News Service.* It gave a Warsaw address.

The drinks arrived and Rand took a sip of his. "Leila told me you were a communications specialist on board one of the houseboats on the Nile River."

He nodded. "That is correct. *Nile K.*"

"We were aware there was at least one in operation, but I don't believe we ever knew about the others."

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"We had a very elaborate operation in those days. But I suppose British Intelligence was just as elaborate."

"Oh, yes." Until that moment Rand had assumed that Constantine's purpose in suggesting lunch was that of a former lover wishing to meet Leila's husband. But now he wasn't so sure. Her name had barely been mentioned, and now the conversation was moving into uncharted territory. Was this man hoping to pry some sort of information from him after all these years? And to what purpose?

Their food arrived and the conversation shifted to London restaurants. Rand suggested a few good ones he knew, and Victor Constantine mentioned a favorite place in Paris. "The food in Cairo was terrible during the time I was there," he said. "Leila took me to some local restaurants, but I never developed a taste for it." He stared at Rand across the table. "Of course, even then there was still a strong British influence in the city. I don't suppose you had any difficulty in dining."

"I can eat most anything," Rand told him.

"Were you ever a field agent for them?"

"Not officially."

"The Department of Concealed Communications. You were its director for a time, no?"

"I was," Rand acknowledged. He wondered how much Leila might have told Constantine about his work, either then or now. But admission of his connection with Double-C revealed no secrets. That fact had been published in various accounts of British Intelligence work.

"In the early nineteen seventies I reported to a man named Taz."

"I knew him. I was in Switzerland when he died there some years later," Rand said.

"You killed him, perhaps?"

"No. He was killed by a car bomb. Not exactly a car bomb, but it's a long story."

Constantine nodded. "I have heard the story. But some thought you were responsible for his death."

"Far from it. I tried to save his life. I believe we came to respect one another toward the end."

The conversation drifted into discussions of the weather, world politics, and the state of the economy. Victor Constantine was knowledgeable on many subjects, but the conversation never returned to either of their Cold War roles in intelligence gathering. When lunch ended with an affable handshake, Rand was left to wonder what it was all about. Neither Leila nor the Cairo years had been discussed in any detail. He drove home through the afternoon sunshine, wondering how he was going to describe the luncheon to her.

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The first thing he noticed upon reaching their house was that the front door was slightly ajar. Certainly he hadn't left it that way. He entered carefully, aware that something was wrong, and saw at once what it was. When they'd married and moved to Reading following his retirement, Leila had set aside a spare downstairs bedroom for his office. One wall was lined with filing cabinets holding the non-secret papers and correspondence he'd been able to take with him, along with Leila's notes on her early archaeological digs. Though he kept the cabinets locked at all times, one drawer was standing slightly ajar. He could see the lock had been tampered with.

First Rand checked the rest of the house to make certain he was alone. Then he used a handkerchief to carefully open the file drawer. In his old business one thought of everything, even booby traps. But there were no hidden tripwires or springs. The open file drawer covered the year he'd met Leila in Egypt. It contained nothing secret, yet it appeared someone had entered his house to go through it.

Entered while he was away, having lunch with Victor Constantine.

He saw now that he'd been set up, lured to that meeting while Constantine sent someone to break into the house.

Rand went upstairs and retrieved the Italian automatic pistol he kept hidden in the linen closet. The clip was full and he slipped the weapon into his pocket. Then he went out to his car and drove back into the city to the hotel on London Road. Whatever Victor Constantine had taken, he intended to get it back.

At the hotel's front desk he showed the business card Constantine had given him. "I seem to have forgotten my room number," he told the clerk.

She checked the computer. "That's six-oh-seven, Mr. Constantine."

"Thank you."

He took the elevator to the sixth floor and knocked at the door. No one answered. Feeling frustrated, Rand glanced around, noting the chambermaid's cart at the other end of the hall. He approached her, smiling. "I'm Mr. Constantine in room six-oh-seven. I seem to have left my key card in my room. Could you open the door for me, please?"

She appeared hesitant and he showed her the business card. "All right, but it's not one of my rooms," she said finally, leading the way down the hall with some reluctance. She used her card to open the door and he gave her a one-pound coin.

Once inside he glanced at the made-up bed and the closed suitcase on the luggage rack. That seemed to be the most likely place

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to begin his search. The bathroom door was almost shut and he pushed it open as he passed.

That was when he saw the body of Victor Constantine lying on his back in a pool of blood by the bathtub.

Rand's first thought was of Leila. He would have to tell her that her long-ago lover was dead. His second thought was the realization that the killing must somehow be linked to the theft from his files. His third thought was that someone was knocking on the hotel room door.

He peered through the peephole and saw a man in a business suit wearing a nameplate that read *Security*. Opening the door a crack, he asked, "Yes?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but the maid reported she let you into this room. I just need to see some identification."

"I—I was about to call you. There's a body in here by the bathtub." He swung the door open to let the man enter. There was nothing else he could do.

The security man glanced at the body. "Do you know this man?"

"He's Victor Constantine. I lunched with him downstairs. This is his room."

The grim-faced man motioned toward a chair. "Please be seated, sir. I'm going to have to notify the police and they'll want to question you."

"I'd like to phone my wife at the university. She lectures there."

"You'd better wait for the police, sir."

The extent of his situation was beginning to dawn on Rand. "I should tell you I'm carrying a firearm."

The security man's face, already grim, seemed to harden into granite. "Please raise your hands above your head."

Rand did as he was told. "It's a small automatic pistol, in the left-hand breast pocket of my jacket. The safety's on."

The man carefully removed it with two fingers and placed it on the bedspread. "Now sit over there and don't move."

He called downstairs to report what he'd found, and within minutes another security man arrived to join him. "What have we got here, Jennings?"

"The chambermaid phoned to say she'd let this gentleman into the room. I came up to check and he showed me the body, then said he had a handgun. It's there on the bed."

The second man peered in at the body. "It's a bloody mess! Was he shot?"

"Can't tell without moving him, and I figured that was a job for the police."

They arrived a few minutes later. Detective Sergeant Herbert Squires was known to Rand from various community meetings

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they'd both attended. While the others bent to examine the body, he came over and asked, "What happened here, Mr. Rand?"

"It's a long story. Before I tell it, I wish you'd let me call my wife at the university. She may be worried when she finds I'm not at home."

Sergeant Squires nodded. "Of course. I'll find an empty room for you to use. The fingerprint boys will want to dust the phones in here."

A constable accompanied Rand to an unoccupied room just down the hall and he phoned Leila's office, hoping to catch her at her desk. He was in luck, and when she answered he told her he had bad news.

"Have you been in an accident?" she asked immediately.

"No. Your friend Constantine has been murdered in his hotel room and I found the body."

"What were you—?"

"I'll tell you about it later. Right now they seem to be holding me for questioning. I'm still at the hotel, but they may take me to police headquarters shortly."

"I can't believe what you're telling me."

"It's true enough."

"Did you kill him, Jeffrey?"

"Of course not! Did you have to ask that question?"

"I'll meet you at headquarters," she said quickly and hung up.

When he returned to Constantine's room, Detective Sergeant Squires told him, "Death appears to have been caused by a gunshot wound to the back of the head. You'll have to come with us to headquarters while we check out your weapon."

"It hasn't been fired," Rand assured them.

"It doesn't seem to have been," Squires agreed, "but the fact that you came here carrying it opens you to questioning. The security man, Jennings, said you tricked the maid into opening the door for you."

Rand sighed. "I'd better tell you the whole thing from the beginning."

The sergeant listened intently, with barely an interruption, until Rand had completed his story. "Will your wife bear this out?"

"Certainly, as much as she knows. I haven't had an opportunity to tell her that Constantine and I had lunch together today, or that our home was entered and robbed."

Leila was awaiting them at headquarters, and Squires escorted them both into the interrogation room. "What happened?" she asked grimly.

He told his story again, noting her surprise upon learning that Constantine had phoned him and suggested lunch. "Why would he do that?" she wondered.

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"As it turned out, his apparent motive was to lure me away from the house so an accomplice could go through my old Egyptian files."

"Those files in your cabinets? There's nothing secret in them, certainly nothing of interest a quarter-century later. The Cold War is over. The Soviet Union is over!"

Squires listened to it all with interest. "How well did you know the dead man?" he asked Leila.

"Quite well, back in the nineteen seventies. Before I met my husband."

"Didn't you regard him as the enemy?"

"Not my enemy, certainly. At the time, he and the other Russians were in Egypt at the invitation of the Egyptian government. I was there searching for some small tombs from the First Dynasty which might have been submerged when the Nile shifted its course. I was skin-diving in the river and Victor Constantine was on one of the Russian houseboats. One day he invited me on board for tea and I accepted. The tea turned out to be vodka but that was all right with me."

"Why did your relationship end?"

Leila shrugged. "I discovered that Victor was spying on some British diplomats in Cairo. I had a Scottish mother and an Egyptian father, and a certain amount of loyalty to my homeland. I broke it off and shortly after that I met Jeffrey." She smiled sadly at Rand, as if begging his forgiveness for all she was putting him through.

Detective Sergeant Squires rubbed his chin in thought. "Did you report this break-in at your home, Mr. Rand?"

"Well, no. My immediate thought was to get down to the hotel and confront Constantine."

Squires stood up. "I think we'd all better take a ride out to your house and examine the scene."

The street where they lived was quiet and nearly deserted, as it often was before the children came home from school. Rand and Leila drove in their separate cars, with Squires and a constable close behind. The sergeant took only a moment to find scratches on the front door lock indicating it had been picked.

"A man of some skill," he decided. "Probably used one of these new electronic gadgets."

They went inside and Leila led the way to Rand's office. "In here, Sergeant Squires."

"Nice place you've got," the detective commented. "These older homes have a great deal of charm."

"Which drawer is it?" Leila asked Rand, but then noticed the drawer open about an inch. "The thief left it like this?"

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"That's right. I haven't looked through it yet."

She shook her head in bewilderment. "It's almost as if he wanted to call attention to what he'd done. This drawer and the front door slightly ajar—"

She turned to Sergeant Squires. "Is it all right if we go through it? Do you need to check for fingerprints?"

"Avoid touching the exterior of the cabinet," he suggested. "If there are no prints there, we have little chance of finding any inside."

But the files seemed untouched to Rand. Some that were kept in manila envelopes had remained sealed. As he looked over the dates, starting in 1971, memory flooded back. He'd been young in those days, under forty, discovering the intoxicating charms of Egypt and true love for the first time. "I don't notice anything missing," he said, "but I can't be certain."

"Yet the thief wanted you to know he'd been here," Squires said. "That's very strange."

The uniformed constable took some photographs at the sergeant's direction, then began dusting for fingerprints. When he finished, he reported, "The door and the filing cabinet seem to have been wiped clean, Sergeant. Either that or he was wearing gloves."

"What now?" Rand asked. "It seems likely Constantine hired someone to break in here and the man found something valuable enough that he decided to keep it and killed his employer."

"That's a possible explanation," Squires conceded. "There are at least two others."

"What are they?"

The detective smiled. "I have to check into a few things. Would it be convenient for each of you to come to my office in the morning for interviews?"

"What time?" Leila asked. "I have classes at the university."

Rand was about to correct her but he bit his tongue. Obviously she knew Thursday was a free day. If she had misspoken it was for a reason. "Ten o'clock?" Squires suggested.

Leila and Rand exchanged glances. "I suppose we could make it then," she answered.

"It might be best if I spoke with you separately," he said. "Suppose we make it ten o'clock for you and ten-thirty for Mr. Rand."

"What's the purpose in that?" Rand asked.

"It's just routine."

Sergeant Squires and the constable departed then. Rand watched them drive away and turned back to Leila. "You told them you had to teach tomorrow."

She shrugged. "I forgot I was off on Thursday. Is that a crime?"

"Is there something you're not telling me, Leila?"

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"No. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"I didn't kill him. I had no reason to kill him. He seemed like a pleasant enough chap. Your name hardly came up in our conversation."

"You must see that Squires believes the break-in and robbery were faked. He suspects you shot Victor out of jealousy and made up the story of the robbery."

"But I didn't. He was after something in the files."

"Let's have a drink while we try to puzzle this out," she suggested.

The morning paper carried a half-column account of the murder ("a man registered at the hotel under the name of Victor Constantine, believed shot to death by a burglar") which supplied no new information. Happily, the brief story made no mention of the reported robbery at Rand's home.

Detective Sergeant Squires was waiting when they arrived at police headquarters. "Have you come up with anything else that might help us?" he asked as he greeted them.

"Not a thing," Rand told him. "We were talking about it all evening. We even went through the house to see if anything else had been searched or stolen, but everything seemed to be in its place."

Squires smiled sympathetically. "Let me speak to Mrs. Rand alone, please. You can wait out here."

Rand sat down on a hard bench facing a bulletin board with *Wanted* fliers and departmental announcements. He wondered why Squires was questioning Leila separately. Did he seriously believe that Rand might have killed that man out of jealousy over something that happened a quarter-century ago?

"Mr. Rand, isn't it?" a voice asked. He looked up to see Jennings, the security man from the hotel who'd been the first to find Rand in Constantine's room.

"That's right, Mr. Jennings."

"It's Phil. Phil Jennings." He sat down next to Rand. "They got you in for questioning, too? They just finished with me."

"Yes. My wife's in there now."

"I told the sergeant I don't know a thing about it. I never even noticed Mr. Constantine. In a hotel as big as ours, guests come and go." The grim face Rand remembered from the hotel room had softened a bit, and the man seemed younger, probably no more than thirty. "I think he just returned to his room and surprised a burglar, like it said in the paper."

"Someone in your place must have seen him."

Jennings nodded. "I spoke with the chambermaid who made up

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his room. She remembers him. Handsome older man who spoke with an accent."

"Was he with another man?"

"No, he was alone. On his way down for breakfast, I imagine, just as she arrived to do his room."

Breakfast, Rand thought. That was where he might have met with the man he'd hired to break into Rand's house. Perhaps someone in the hotel dining room would remember them.

Sergeant Squires appeared in the doorway, escorting Leila out. "Mr. Rand, you may come in now."

Leila smiled at him and went to sit down. Jennings said goodbye and went on his way.

As Rand settled into the chair opposite the sergeant's desk, Squires cleared his throat. "First off, I want to tell you you're in the clear on the gun. It wasn't even the same caliber as the one that killed Victor Constantine. I'll return it to you when we're finished here."

"I'd appreciate it. I assure you I took it with me only for self-defense. There was never any intention of shooting the man."

"I know. We've checked into your background, Mr. Rand, and you're highly regarded in government circles. I understand you're retired from British Intelligence."

"An obscure branch of it, yes."

"And your wife tells me she was working in Egypt when you two met."

"That's correct. She met Constantine in Egypt, too."

Squires rubbed his chin. "We haven't been able to locate his passport, which seems odd. He had some business cards in his wallet, and the key card to his room, but no passport."

"He was staying somewhere in London. No doubt the passport is in his room there."

"Perhaps. People traveling in a foreign country often like to keep their passports with them."

Rand was growing tired of the seemingly pointless speculations. "Are you trying to get at something?"

"Yes, I am," Squires admitted. "We checked at the university. Your wife had no classes yesterday between noon and two o'clock. She could have gone to your house, opened the door with her key, scratched the lock a bit so it would appear there was a forced entry, and did the same with the filing cabinet."

Rand could hardly believe his ears. "What are you saying, that my wife might have killed Victor Constantine? That's ridiculous! She'd told me all about him last week."

"Did she really tell you all? Is it possible, Mr. Rand, that your wife did some work for Constantine during those Cairo years, spy-

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ing for the Russians? Perhaps he was blackmailing her about it, threatening to tell you."

"Not a chance. She would have told me. We're completely honest with each other."

"She says she never told you about the Constantine relationship until last week. Was that being completely honest?"

"Look here, Leila didn't kill Constantine or anyone else! If you wish to continue this line of questioning we'd better phone our solicitor."

"No need for that," Squires assured him, backing off a bit. "Certainly I'm open to any new evidence you might present. Perhaps the break-in at your home had nothing to do with Constantine's killing."

But something in the conversation had set off a spark in Rand's memory. "It has something to do with it, all right. Give me a day to follow up on an idea I have."

"All right, you may go," the sergeant told him. "Neither you nor your wife is under arrest."

Yet, he seemed to add silently.

Rand didn't speak until he and Leila were clear of police headquarters. Then she said, "Somehow he suspects I'm involved."

"I know. He told me."

She turned to him. "You don't believe that, do you?"

"Of course not. Do you have a train schedule in your purse?"

"To London?"

"Yes. We should catch the next train if we can."

"What—?"

"I can't tell you yet. Just trust me."

"Do you know who killed him?"

"Maybe."

He was quiet during the train journey, scanning the copy of the London newspaper he'd purchased at the station. It was not until he got to the last section, when he came upon a listing of the day's events, that he found what he was looking for.

"See here," he pointed out to Leila, "there's a conference of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain all this week at the Barbican Centre. Don't you usually go to those?"

"I haven't been in years. One doesn't discover much in the way of archaeological treasures in a lecture hall at Reading University. I leave that to others now."

"I think we should drop in on it. We might learn something."

"What can we learn?" she asked, and he told her his theory as she sat wide-eyed by his side.

In London they took a cab to the Barbican Centre and entered its stark concrete reception hall. The area seemed crowded with men and women standing in groups or hurrying off to the next session. "Wait here," he told Leila as they approached the regis-

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tration desk. He went up and spoke to the young woman wearing an AIGB badge but she shrugged and shook her head. He took a program from her and scanned the list of panels and reports on the schedule for that afternoon.

"Conference Room D, second floor," he told Leila. "Come on."

"Jeffrey, are you sure you want to do this?"

"Sure enough," he said. At Room D he stationed her outside. "If something goes wrong, you may need help from the security guards."

"I know what to do," she assured him.

He went in without her, seeing at the far end of the room a dais with a long table and microphones. Four men and a woman were seated there, and a question period seemed to be in progress. Rand walked to the nearest audience microphone and raised his hand. After a moment the moderator called upon him. "Please give your name and affiliation when asking your question."

"Jeffrey Rand, retired. I would like to know the progress of the Egyptian archaeological dig known as *Nile K,* and I address my question to our visitor from Russia, Mr. Victor Constantine."

Rand hadn't known what reaction his question might bring, but the tall black-haired man rose quickly to his feet and walked off the dais, heading for the room's fire exit off in the corner. He didn't get far. Leila and two security guards were waiting for him outside the door.

"You knew he'd go for the fire exit?" Rand asked her later, after the City of London police had taken Constantine into custody.

"I knew. He did it once before, a long time ago. But how did you know he was alive? And who was the dead man in his room?"

"I told you a little of it on the train. My first mistake was getting everything backwards. You told me he'd located you through a recent article you published in the *Journal of Archaeology.* But how did a former Russian spy happen to be reading such a journal? It's not the sort of reading matter you'd find on the average newsstand or in a doctor's waiting room. No, Constantine was reading it because of a professional interest in the subject. He'd become an archaeologist, or at least a treasure hunter, and because of his early relationship with you he was especially interested in sites along the Nile River. That's how I located him today. We knew he'd come to London for some purpose, and when I saw the Conference on Archaeology listed in the paper I took a chance that he'd be here. It was pure luck that we arrived while he was actually on a panel."

"I understand all that, but what about our robbery?"

"My mistake was in jumping to the conclusion that Constantine was after my records from the period. Actually, he was after your records of the Nile River searches you carried out for Cairo Uni-

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versity. He believed he was close to locating a lost tomb beneath the river, and he needed your records to pinpoint the location. Though he brought along a man to assist him, once he talked to you and established your daily schedules he decided it would be best if he burgled our house himself. He knew exactly what he was looking for, and as a former spy he would have been well trained in picking locks. You probably mentioned to him that our old files were kept together."

Leila nodded. "He was asking about the house, how we lived."

"He went to the house, and since I'd never met him, his assistant assumed his identity and lured me out to lunch. I thought it odd that he didn't talk more about you, or about his days with Russian Intelligence. He mentioned you briefly, and my old enemy Taz, but of course Constantine would have told him that much. Two clues should have tipped me off sooner. You mentioned Constantine's black hair, probably dyed, and both you and the chambermaid said he spoke with an accent. The man with whom I lunched had gray hair and spoke perfect English with no trace of an accent."

"Why did Constantine kill him?"

"Perhaps he didn't fully trust the man. It must have occurred to him that if he left obvious signs of a break-in I would phone the police or return to the hotel myself. If Constantine killed the man in his hotel room and left his wallet and business cards on the body, the police would assume it was him, especially if I identified him. It might be days, if ever, before you or someone else corrected the error. Of course he couldn't leave his passport on the body because the photo wouldn't match the corpse."

"All this over that research I did more than a quarter-century ago!" Leila marveled. "And I thought Victor came to Reading simply to see me again." ●

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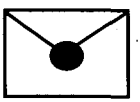

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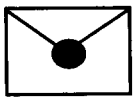

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COPY CAT

by David Dean

A policeman by day, David Dean tells us that he draws many of his story ideas from "incidents and encounters while on patrol." He debuted in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in 1990 and has since contributed half a dozen stories to this magazine. While his new tale is by no means a police procedural, it does involve a cop—in a case as curious as any we've come across.

The chief sat at his cluttered desk and studied the photographs. His secretary had gone home to prepare supper for her family hours before and left him alone in his darkening office. His wife had not called. Most likely, she would not be there when, or if, he finally did arrive home. Quite possibly, she would be seeing the realtor who was handling the sale of their house. It was much too large for them now that the children were gone.

His senior investigator had, in a touchingly offhand manner, offered to look into the matter of the realtor, but the chief quietly declined his offer without ever acknowledging its implications. He had no wish to dissuade his wife from the affair, and even less to see his old friend's career destroyed by accusations of strong-arming his wife's newest lover. He was too tired to waste what little energy he mustered each day in fighting unwinnable battles, and a certain private peace lay in this acceptance. It was his wife who was in turmoil and paid the greatest price for her sexual wanderings, and it was for her, not himself, that he felt pity.

At five foot, nine inches tall, two hundred and forty pounds, with a gimpy leg (due to the only shooting the town had experienced in the last twelve years) and an unreliable heart, he could no longer satisfy the passions of the woman who had made the nights of his youth incandescent. With the leaving of the children, those passions had grown inexplicably white-hot, and she had passed from his life like a comet in a winter sky. In the end, he knew, age would quench and destroy her. Meanwhile, the kids refused to visit and people talked.

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Opening a drawer in his desk, he withdrew a pack of cigarettes and an ashtray he kept hidden there and gratefully lit up, inhaling deeply. A breeze wafted caressingly from an open window and ruffled the photos that lay before him. He adjusted his glasses and spread them out. They were beautifully done, and he had to admit, the crime-scene techs from the county prosecutor's office had done a marvelous job. The color and clarity were impeccable, the subject matter appalling: the horror of the victim forever captured for posterity.

The tramp, as the chief had come to call the white male, had never been identified, despite every effort. He had carried no papers or licenses that would aid in identification, and his body had gone undiscovered far too long for fingerprints or facial photographs to be of any assistance. No one in town had gone missing, and he matched no missing-persons reports, or rather, his almost generic corpse matched too many to be of any assistance. In the end, he had just become "the tramp."

The location of his body had added weight to this conclusion, being discovered partially concealed by debris in a wooded area at the edge of town, near the park and its small zoo, and not far from some switching tracks known to be frequented by freight-hopping winos. In the county's small law-enforcement circle, it was generally agreed that the tramp had been the victim of a fellow hobo, now long departed; killed over a bottle of cheap wine or for a pocketful of change. The townspeople seemed to agree. After the initial alarm had worn off, and it had been determined that the victim was not one of them, the local population had lost interest with surprising alacrity.

But they had not been there and seen the body, thought the chief. The pitiable and desolate end to a fellow man who, presumably, came from the loins of woman, as they all had. For some reason, the townspeople's lack of caring fueled the chief's own sense of personal responsibility for this nameless man, and he found himself overly occupied with a case that he could have safely shelved.

Had he been less preoccupied, he might have noticed that the mayor and town council found his concern morbid and distasteful; an opinion shared by most of their constituency. His recent absences from council meetings and his increasingly disheveled appearance had been duly noted, while their probable cause had been debated in public places and private homes. There were two camps of thought: The public at large attributed it to his obsession with the unsolved murder; those closer to him laid the blame on his wife's blatant infidelities.

Unaware of this, he studied the pictures on his desk carefully, occasionally referring to his copy of the medical examiner's

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autopsy report. Even with the use of a magnifying glass, no revelation leapt out at him. Not even a small but overlooked clue to give him fresh hope. Both body and scene remained well documented and determinedly mute.

The wound favored by the M.E. for the cause of death remained distressingly evident as a gaping tear in the blackened parchment of the skin tissues at the throat. Within, the upper vertebrae were twice deeply scored, evidence of the force of the slashing. The neck was broken as well, whether by violence or the result of scavenging animals could not be determined.

The rest of the body evoked similar equivocation. That the breast cage had been rent open and the abdomen eviscerated were apparent. Whether it was the work of the assailant or a host of carrion feeders remained an open question. The M.E. refused to commit on a corpse "at least six weeks old," that had been dry-baked in a compost of forest litter by an unusually hot September sun and worried by animals.

The chief yawned and stubbed out his cigarette. Pushing himself to his feet and scooping the grisly photos back into their folder, he thought longingly for a moment of his bed. He dropped the folder back into a drawer and carefully closed it, anxious that his secretary not inadvertently discover the disturbing pictures, then limped over to his worn leather couch, a relic of a long-forgotten predecessor.

Kicking off his shoes, he lay down, pulling up the old army blanket he kept hidden under the couch and tucking it around him. Reasonably comfortable, he reached up and turned off the overheads. There, in the swimming darkness, he wondered if his wife would return home that night and regret the empty bed. He wished that he didn't care, but he did—terribly. And with the bleak honesty that besets weary men, he knew that a large portion of his obsession with the death of the tramp was simply a device to avoid the more immediate concerns of the living. After a short while, he fell deeply asleep.

The runner stood at his sink, drinking deeply from a glass of filtered water. The predawn world outside his window remained dark and hidden. This did not bother him, as his mood was one of ebullience and well-being. He was twenty-seven and in his prime: tall, lithe, and finely muscled. His thoughts strayed for a moment to the night before and a smile spread happily across his face. The memory of his sexual escapades with a woman twenty years his senior gave him an added sense of power; her lewd appreciation of his toned, handsome body and, later, her grateful cries of ecstasy aroused him even in the cool damp of the morning. The knowledge that she was the wife of another man, and the chief of police at

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that, gave the liaison an added edge, a certain illicit and dangerous flavor. She was a lovely, voluptuous woman for her age, he had to admit—if a bit worn at the edges.

Setting the glass in the sink, he bent easily at the waist, touching his toes. After a few moments, he sat on a throw rug on the polished wooden floor and began a series of stretches and warmups. He was anxious to be out, but his regimen dictated he be properly prepared for his run, to prevent injury. He was well rested despite the evening's exertions, having bid a reasonably reluctant good night to his pliable real-estate client by ten-thirty. By eleven o'clock, he had showered, brushed his teeth, and was contentedly asleep. He controlled his schedule very carefully.

Stepping out onto his deck, he took several gulps of air, slowly exhaling each.

When the sun, a red ellipse on the horizon, began to break through the patchy morning fog, he came down onto his back lawn and began to jog across the wet grass to the tracks that ran behind his house, swinging a five-pound running weight in each hand.

He had used the presence of the railroad as a bargaining chip to bring down the price of the house when he had been negotiating for it. In reality, he knew that the freight trains were an infrequent event, and that he was such a sound sleeper that even their occasional passing would have no effect on him. In truth, he had desired the house partially for its proximity to the tracks. The well-worn path that ran along the side of the rails had long been one of his favorites, carrying him through miles of solitude and forest, to arrive at a smoothly asphalted bike path that bisected the tracks as it entered the county park. Once there, he would make a right and jog through the lovely, deserted, early-morning grounds, past the rather forlorn zoo, to arrive at the town's main street. From there, it was another right and home for the single cup of caffeinated coffee that he allowed himself each day.

Gaining the tracks, he turned north and began his jog in earnest. It was darker than he had expected; the overhanging trees and abundant undergrowth effectively shading the path and giving it a tunnel-like effect. In spite of the unnatural warmth of the season, the days were growing shorter, with the sun rising later and later each morning. Today, its appearance seemed unnaturally tardy, and he looked at his illuminated watch to ensure that he had not mistaken the time. He had not, and the knowledge gave him a certain sense of foreboding, as if the night were attempting to prolong its stay.

He increased his stride in an attempt to outrun this feeling and after a few moments, as his heart began to pump the oxygen-enriched blood through his system, he began to feel better. His

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eyes, too, began to adjust to the dimness, and the soft, gray, cottony shapes that loomed to each side began to take on definition.

To his left, the low hummock of the tracks could be seen, with its twin rails stretching into the distance like a great fallen ladder. On his right, the dripping shrubs and weedy, second-growth trees separated into distinct forms and less mysterious shapes. Even a subdued color began to bleed into his surroundings, like a chameleon gaining a green leaf. Then, like an announcement, sunlight began to pour over the tops of the trees to his right, striking the far wall of his man-made valley and throwing it into sharp relief. With the sun near to escaping the horizon, his heart felt lighter.

He felt the pounding of that organ with a great sense of pride, knowing the promise of strength and speed it hammered out, and began to pump his arms more vigorously, the weights like gloves on his hands. By his calculations, the entrance to the park lay three minutes' distance, and he lifted his face to the sky as if to hasten the sun's warming ascent.

Ahead, something low to the ground streaked silently towards him. Like him, it ran in the deep shadows of the path, apparently oblivious to his presence. He slowed to a stop, breath catching in his throat, looking for a way to avoid it.

The fox, orange-red in the early autumn light, saw him at the last minute and braked itself some twenty yards away, nearly sitting on its haunches with the effort. For a moment they stared at one another: the fox, its long red tongue lolling across its black lips, panting; the man, panting as well, steam rising from his overheated body in the still-cool morning air.

Before the runner could react, the fox fled like a flame into the undergrowth, turning not so much as a stone with its silent departure. The runner was left in sole possession of the track. He stared down its length and saw nothing.

After a few moments, he began to jog again, slowly regaining his former pace, but his recent, and brief, peace of mind had fled with the fox.

As he traveled north, he saw the last tendrils of fog rising into the air above the trees like thin, ghostly streamers heralding the promise of another hot day. He also saw the killer of the tramp.

Had he not kept glancing into the brush with the nagging fear that the fox, grown bold with rabies, would come dashing out to bite his bare legs, he might never have seen. But now it was too late . . . as if not making eye contact would change the outcome.

His heart fluttered and lurched in an alarming manner, making him gasp aloud in a high, girlish voice. His knees buckled and he stumbled with the sudden surge of adrenaline furnished by his certain knowledge, in spite of his brain screaming that he should

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run as never before. And, in the midst of all this, his thoughts shot upward like a covey of startled quail, flying in a dozen different directions, re-forming in revelation, then scattering again at the terror revealed.

It was like him to have been unconcerned that his favorite jogging path took him daily past the murder scene. He could truly say that it had never given him more than a moment's pause. It had been an isolated event amongst persons that these things happen to, and his strength, status, and confidence precluded any other conclusion. What little thought he had given it was evidenced in the five-pound weights that doubled as deterrents to violence, and that he now threw to the ground in a mindless flight from an undiscriminating death.

The killer, unlike the runner, loved the brief time betwixt night and day—that quiet teetering of the balance from darkness to light, when the world is given over to the fortunate prey and the predator slips unobserved to its lair. But, being a predator, the killer understood too that as the sun drove back the darkness, it deepened the shadows and lulled the unsuspecting with its false promise of peace. The dawn presented a last, and best, opportunity.

He had watched the runner for some minutes as he approached, panting and wary, yet determined on his course. A course that would take him within feet of the killer. The killer had heard the steady crunching of the gravel beneath the runner's feet for some time before he hastened to his vantage point beside the trail, disturbing some small animal as he did so. There, he lay on his belly . . . waiting. Then the steps ceased.

He was tempted to stick his head out and look, but resisted. Like all hunters, he understood patience as the thin wall that separated those that would die from those that would kill. He lay there in the wet grass, enjoying the anticipation, the . . . almost uncertainty.

The footsteps resumed and gained in speed. A few moments later, the runner came into his view, his head swiveling from side to side, obviously disturbed and wary. He willed himself to remain still and twitched pleasurably.

He could see that his victim was large and healthy. This was unlike the last, and gave him pause. That one had been easy. Even after years of confinement it had been an effortless kill, and the memory of it thrilled him and filled his mouth with the taste of iron. All those years, unable to do what he wanted . . . needed most!

Then the runner was next to him; a body's length away. At the last possible moment before his passing, the runner turned and

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saw. His eyes met the killer's and all was instantly understood between them: the role that each must play.

The killer broke from his cover in that same instant and began his silent pursuit of the stumbling, sobbing runner. In a moment, he was upon him, slashing him to the bone with his first, joyful blow. The slanting rays of the new sun crept over them as the killer celebrated the dawn in a welter of blood, punctuated by the occasional grunt of satisfaction. The victim, like the rest of nature, had grown quiet and still.

With the same caution he had exercised with his previous victim, the killer dragged the corpse to a spot deep in the woods, carefully covering it with the litter and debris of the forest floor. Satisfied with his work, he turned and hurried east, towards the park. He knew, from years of watching, that soon the park attendants would be arriving and he could not risk their observing him. He would not risk his greatest secret. Not after waiting so very long to enjoy it.

As the first service trucks approached the garage area, the killer watched from a perch in a large tree that overlooked his compound. Calling greetings to one another, the men hurried into a Quonset hut for their morning coffee. The great cat hesitated a moment longer, gathering strength in its haunches, then sprang from the branch, clearing the fence and inner moat, and landing lightly within.

When the first zoo attendant made his rounds, he found the old Bengal in its favorite spot beneath the ancient oak tree, carefully preening itself, for all the world like a big house cat. The tree bore deep scores in its venerable trunk, testifying to years of service as a scratching post to the mangy old tiger that had dwelt beneath its ever-spreading branches. As he turned away, satisfied that his charge was well and secure for another day, he briefly wondered if it weren't high time for the grounds division to give the old tree a serious pruning. Its great branches shaded nearly the entire enclosure, narrowing the big cat's choices for sunning himself to fewer and fewer spots with each passing year. Making a mental note of this, the ageing keeper continued on his rounds.

The tiger disinterestedly followed the old man with his round yellow eyes, until he vanished from sight, then resumed his careful grooming, removing the last of his victim's blood from his fur with a broad, raspy tongue, pink as a flower.

That morning the chief arose stiff and cranky from a fitful night's sleep on the lumpy couch, unaware that eventually another body would be discovered and that when it was, he would become the prime, and in the public's mind the only suspect of the copy-cat murder of his wife's latest lover. ●

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NEXT ISSUE...

Death by Eros
BY STEVEN SAYLOR

An Imperfect Gift
BY KATE WILHELM

The Acid Test
BY IAN RANKIN

Revenge Is Sweet
BY CELIA FREMLIN

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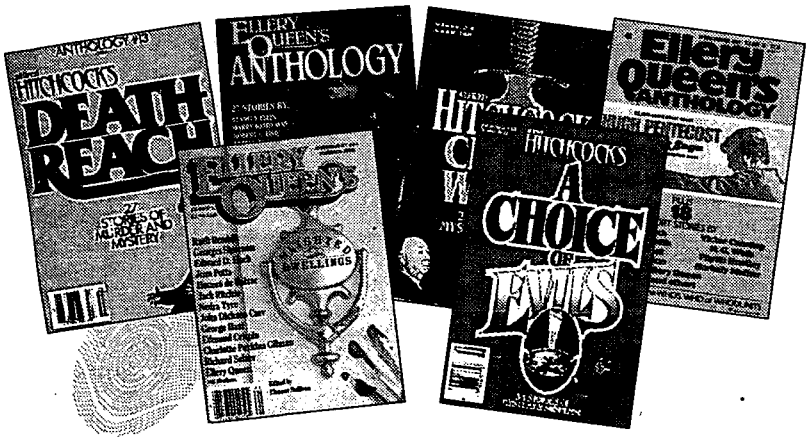

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SKIN CARE UPDATE

The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

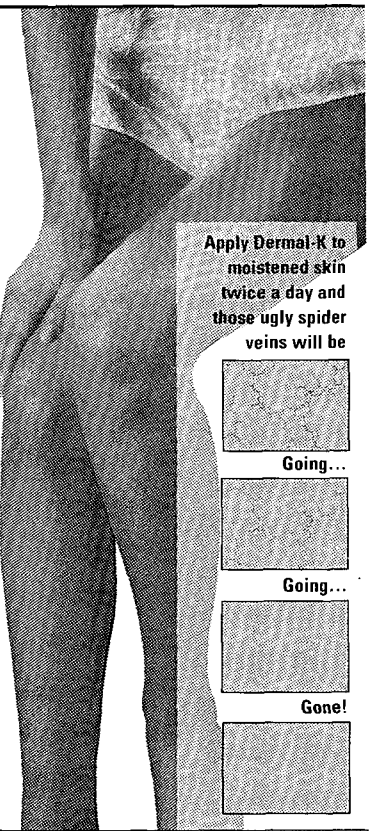
by Melinda Walthington

It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters. Although men are not immune to spider veins, they are overwhelmingly a female problem. Unlike large, bulging varicose veins that can cause pain and even lead to serious health problems, spider veins are primarily a cosmetic problem.

Not even proper diet and exercise are guaranteed to prevent unsightly spider veins. They tend to be hereditary, and worsen as we age. Aside from changing the way you dress, using concealing makeup or resorting to expensive treatments, there has been little you could do to get rid of spider veins—until now!

Secret weapon. Formerly available only through plastic surgeons and dermatologists, professional-strength Dermal-K eliminates spider veins—without painful shots or expensive treatments! This unique cream can make embarrassing veins disappear in just weeks, painlessly, easily and inexpensively.

Scientific solution. Vitamin K is essential to the liver for the formulation of substances that promote blood clotting. A blend of Vitamin K and other healing compounds, Dermal-K strengthens capillaries, enhances coagulation and heals weakened tissues. Plastic surgeons have long used this cream to minimize post-operative bruising and scarring. Apply Dermal-K twice a day and watch spider veins fade...and finally disappear!



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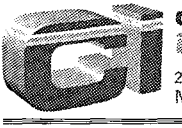

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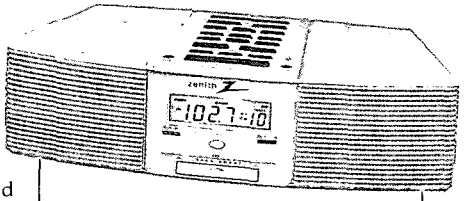
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Big sound from a stereo radio—without the big price!

Zenith Audio, a leading electronics manufacturer designs a "Small Footprint," "Big Sound" stereo system and drives the price below $100.



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- **"Fail-safe" Alarm System**

Zenith Audio has developed a Digital Stereo Clock Radio that boasts the acoustic quality and practical features of stereo radios four times as expensive. You'll be amazed at the sound quality and powerful bass you get from a radio this small and this affordable. This stereo radio features an 11-key handheld remote control and an input jack for CD players or other audio sources.

Loaded with features. The AM/FM radio features digital tuning for pinpoint reception and crystal-clear sound. The STEREO indicator allows you to tune in to the stereo signal. It also picks up TV and WEATHER signals with 13 TV channels and 7 Weather channels, so your Zenith Audio Clock Radio is a great source of news, entertainment and information. You can program the unit's memory for 37 preset stations, and the tuning buttons can operate either manually or in a automatic search mode.

Practical functions. The backlit clock has several alarm functions, so you can wake to either radio, TV, weather or a buzzer. The sleep timer allows you to fall asleep to up to 90 minutes of music, TV or weather and then shuts off automatically. In the morning, if you need a few extra minutes of sleep, press the SNOOZE bar on the control panel or on the remote. The radio or alarm tone stops for 10 minutes and then sounds again. The unit's battery backup system will maintain the time, alarm and preset station memories in the event of a temporary power interruption.

Factory direct risk-free offer. You can spend hundreds of dollars more on a stereo radio, but why do it? We get the Stereo Clock Radio direct from Zenith, and pass the savings on to you. This product comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If you are not satisfied for any reason, simply return it within 90 days for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

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